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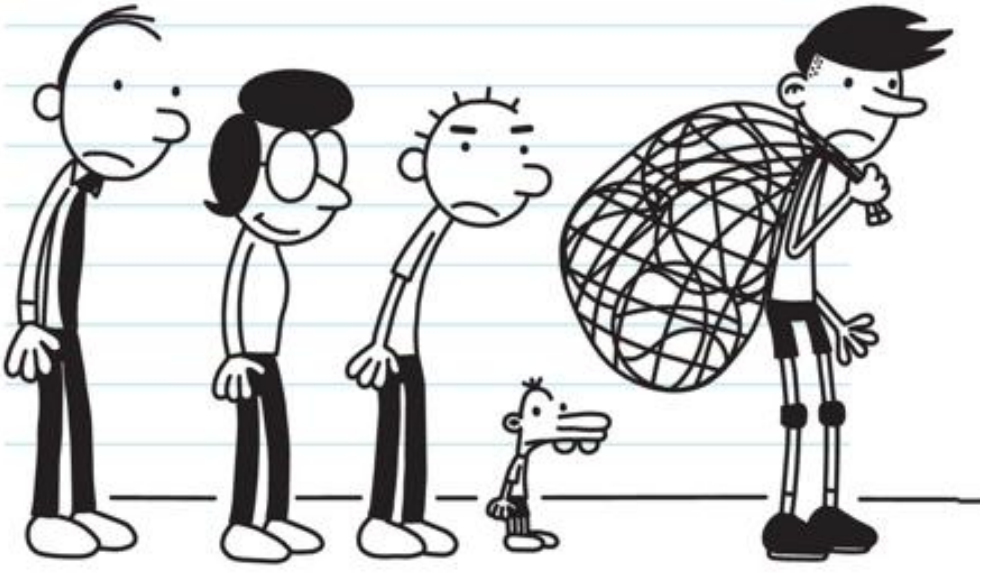
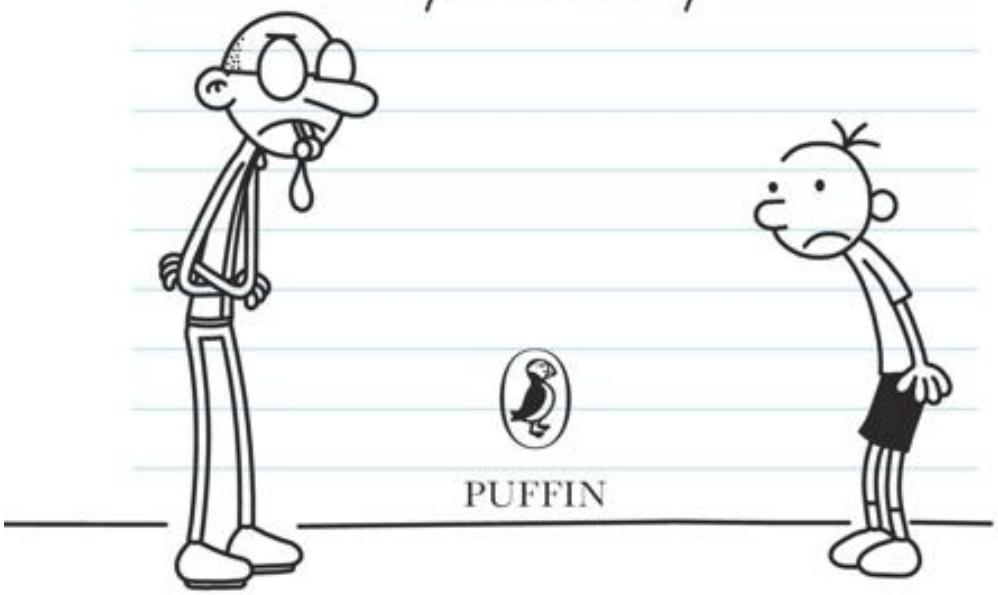


DIARY of a Wimpy Kid

BIG SHOT

by Jeff Kinney



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TO WILL AND GRANT

SEPTEMBER

Monday

I've heard that athletes are born with special

genes that make them good at sports. Well,

whatever those genes are, I guess I was born

WITHOUT them.

Mom's always saying that everyone who's part of

a team has an important role to play. But when

it comes to sports it seems like my job is to make

everybody ELSE look good.

At this point in my life, I'm pretty sure I'm not

gonna grow up to become a professional athlete.

So I'm officially announcing my retirement.

The crazy thing is, I used to actually LIKE sports.

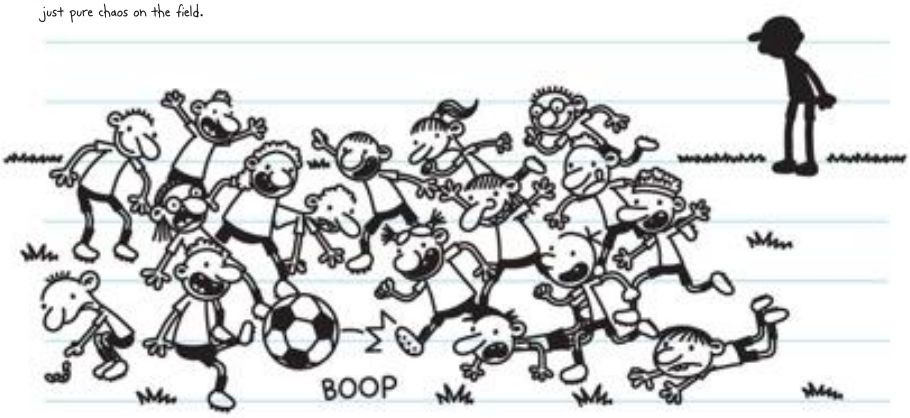
But that was back in pre-school, when sports were

still FUN. The first sport I ever played was

soccer. I didn't know the rules, but neither did

any of the other kids. So most of the time it was

just pure chaos on the field.



Wherever the ball went, we all chased after it.

Every once in a while the ball would pop out

of the pack and go into someone's goal, then

EVERYONE would celebrate.

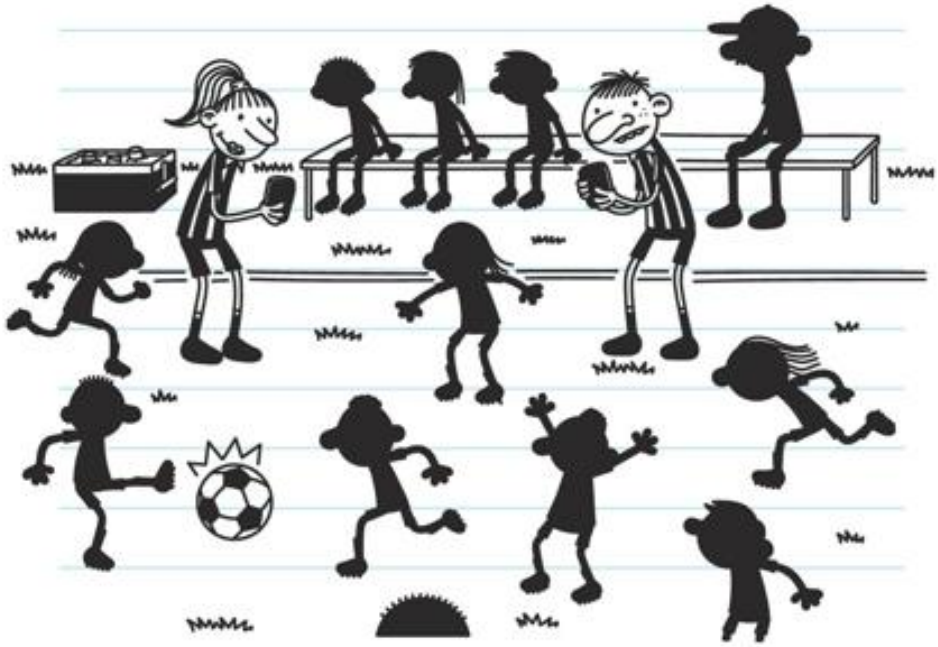
Nobody kept score, so you never knew who was

winning or losing. And the parents didn't care

because they were too busy doing their own thing.

The referees were middle-school kids, and they

didn't really pay attention to the game, either.



In fact, the refs didn't even blow their whistles

when the ball went out of bounds. So half the

time we'd be playing on the wrong field and didn't

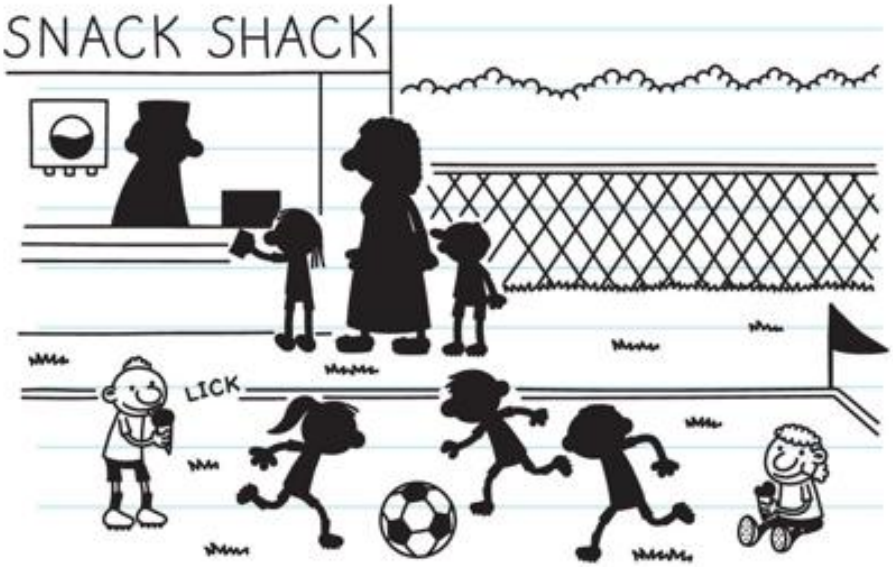
KNOW it.

After the game, we'd always get slushies and

junk food at the snack shack. And sometimes we

wouldn't even wait for the game to be OVER to

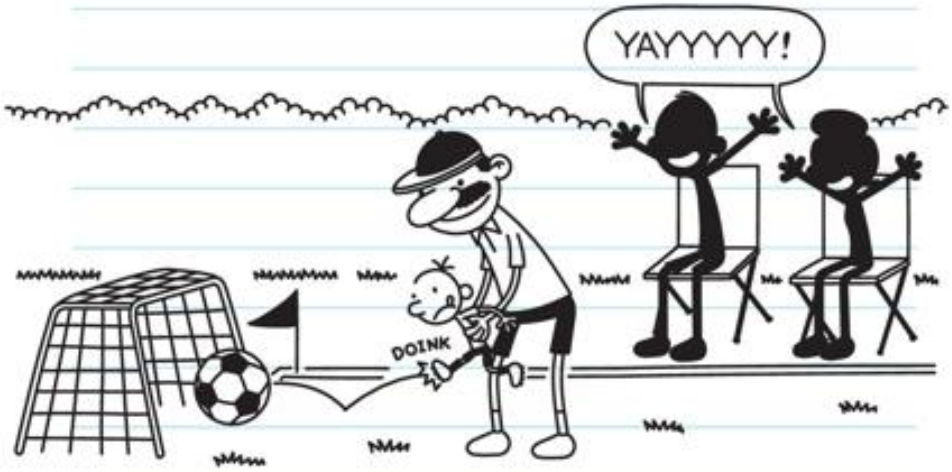
treat ourselves.



The coaches were really nice and made sure everyone

got a chance to score. And that made everyone

feel good about themselves.



Back then, I was SURE I was gonna grow up

to be a professional soccer player. I even kept my

rookie card in mint condition in case it turned out

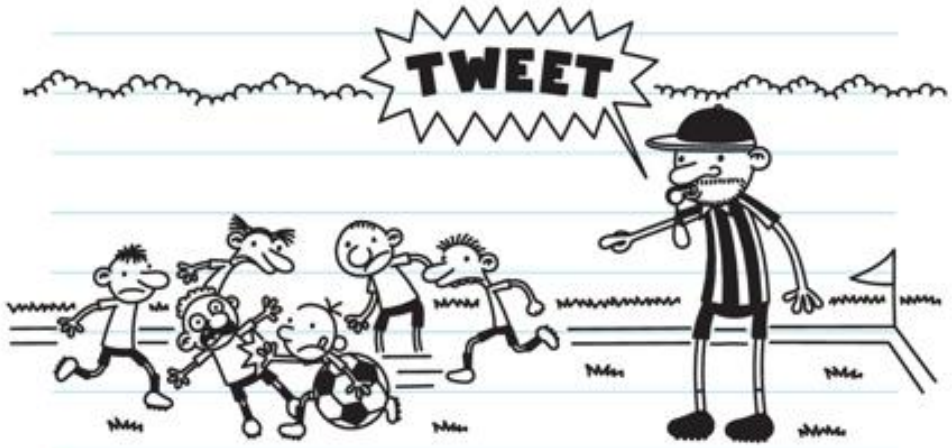
to be worth something one day.

But when we got to kindergarten, everything

CHANGED. The refs started using their

whistles, and they didn't let us do the kinds of

things we got away with the year before.



That season, the refs blew their whistles almost

every time I touched the ball. So when I was in

the game I'd stand in the corner of the field and

pray the ball didn't roll to me.

It's not like I was getting a lot of playing time

in kindergarten anyway. The coach only put in

the kids who were GOOD, and the rest of us sat

on the bench.

Mom told me the reason the coach wasn't playing

me was because I was his "secret weapon" and he

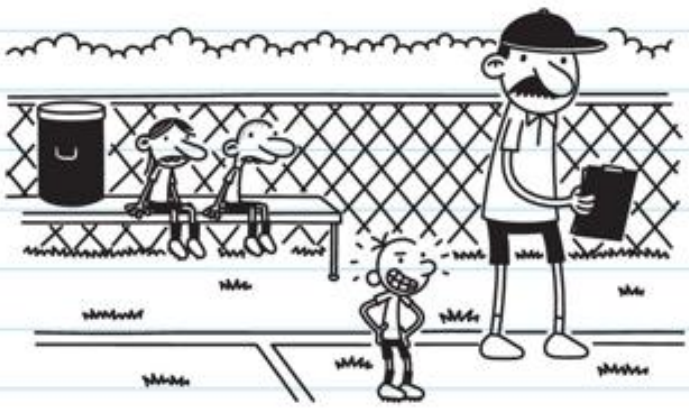
was saving me for a big moment.

But I didn't understand that Mom was just

trying to make me feel better about myself. So

whenever the coach DID put me in the game I'd

go out there thinking I was hot stuff.



Even the snack shack wasn't fun that year. Some parents complained that they were selling too much junk food, so they replaced the slushies and other sugary treats with HEALTHY options.

But the slushie sales from the snack shack paid for the field upkeep. So that year the parks department could only afford to mow the grass once every three weeks, which really slowed the games down.

After a bunch of kids got tick bites from playing

soccer in the long grass, they decided to end the

season early, which was totally fine with ME.

I feel bad that I've never been good at sports,

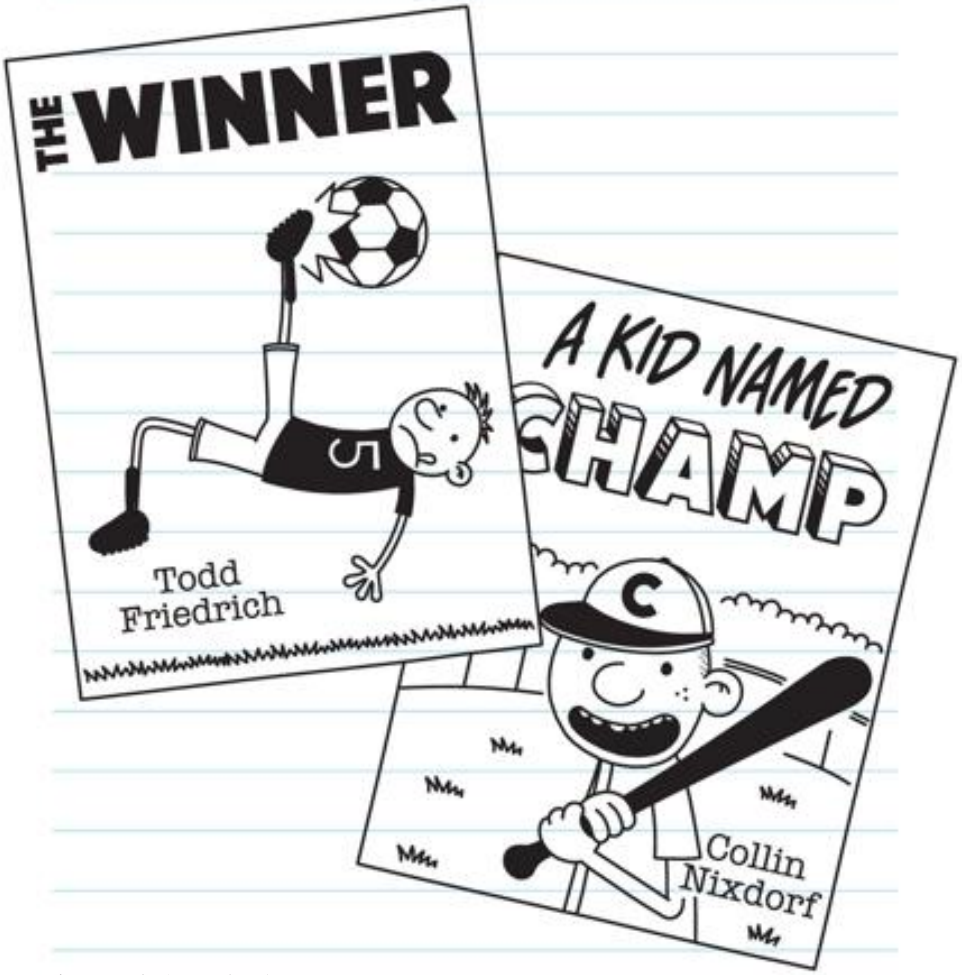
because I think Dad was hoping I'd be a star

athlete. Whenever he'd go to the library, he'd

always come home with a stack of sports books.

I'm sure there are kids who are into those types

of stories, but that was never ME.



If you go to the library, you'll find all sorts of

books about kids who do amazing things and lead

their teams to victory. But I never had any

experiences like that, and I'll bet there are lots

of kids out there just like me.

So one of these days somebody should write a book

for the REST of us.

It's not like I've got anything against sports.

I like them just fine, as long as I'm not the one

PLAYING. In fact, this summer I watched the

Olympics on TV pretty much non-stop.

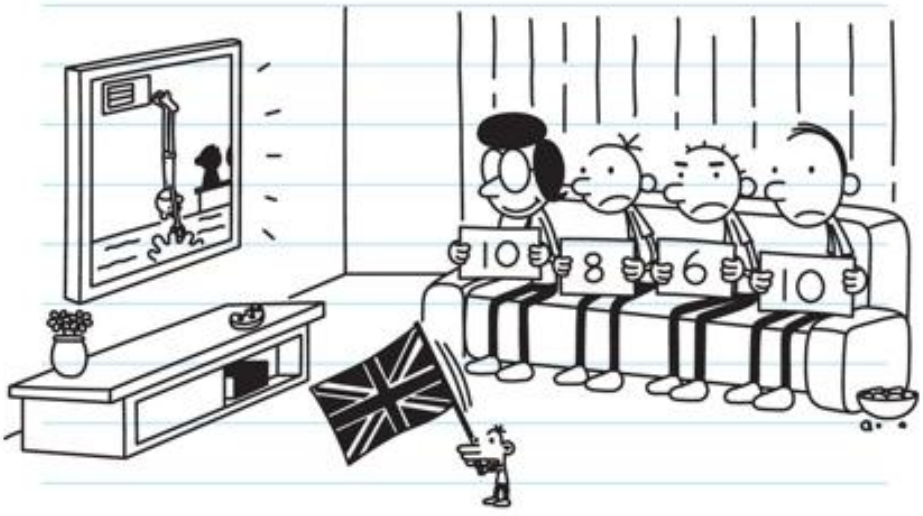
It was Mom's idea for us to watch the Games as a

family. She says that these days everyone's in their

own little bubble, and sport is one of the only

things that can still bring people together. But I

think a little togetherness goes a long way.



Mom says she loves the Olympics because they show

what human beings are capable of at their best.

But I like watching for the BLOOPERS.

I'm just glad it's somebody ELSE out there and

not ME. Because I'm sure I'd be nervous if I

knew there were millions of people watching from

home. And when you mess up in the Olympics

you're supposed to act graceful about it.

But if I just spent four years of my life training

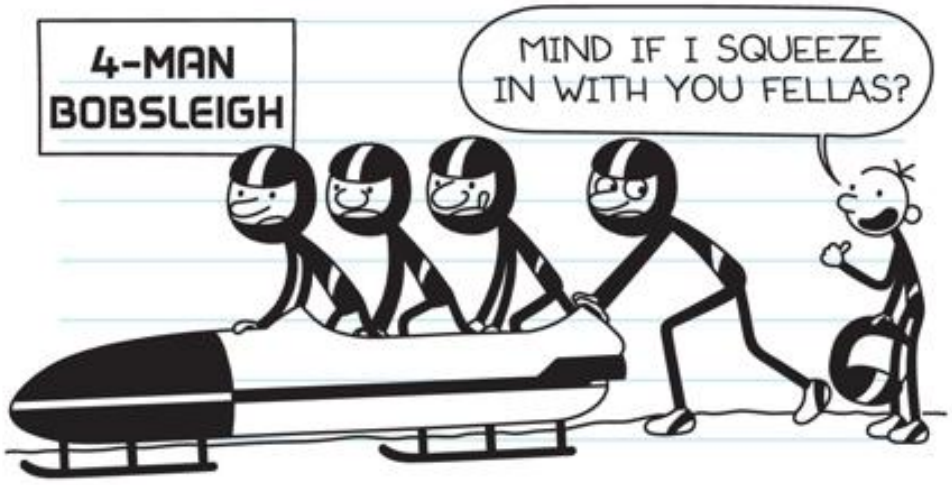
and then made some dumb mistake, I'm pretty

sure I'd have trouble smiling for the cameras.

That's why I'd do one of those sports where

you're part of a TEAM. Because then, when you

screw up, it's harder for people to tell.



In fact, if I was in the Olympics, I'd be in

one of those events where a HORSE is involved.

Because then if something goes wrong, at least

you'd have someone to BLAME.

But now that I think about it, that's probably the

reason why horses sometimes play up.

Even though we watched a lot of Olympics coverage,

I still don't understand the way everything works.

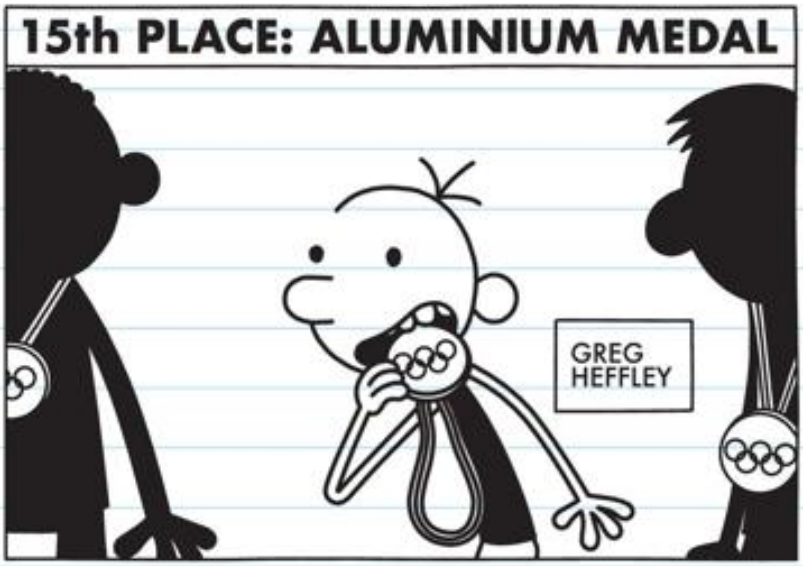
For one thing, I don't see why they only hand

out medals to the athletes who take the top three

spots in a competition. It seems to me like they

could keep going with the medals so EVERYONE

goes home with a prize.



The way it is right now, they give you a gold

medal if you take first place, silver if you take

second, and bronze if you take third. But I feel

like there's a pretty big step down between silver

and bronze.

At least gold and silver are WORTH something.

But if you won a bronze medal you'd be lucky to

get a few bucks for it.

I figure the moment your medal is the most valuable

is right after you WIN it. So, if I got one, I'd

try to take advantage of the TV audience and

find a buyer.

During the medal ceremony they have the top

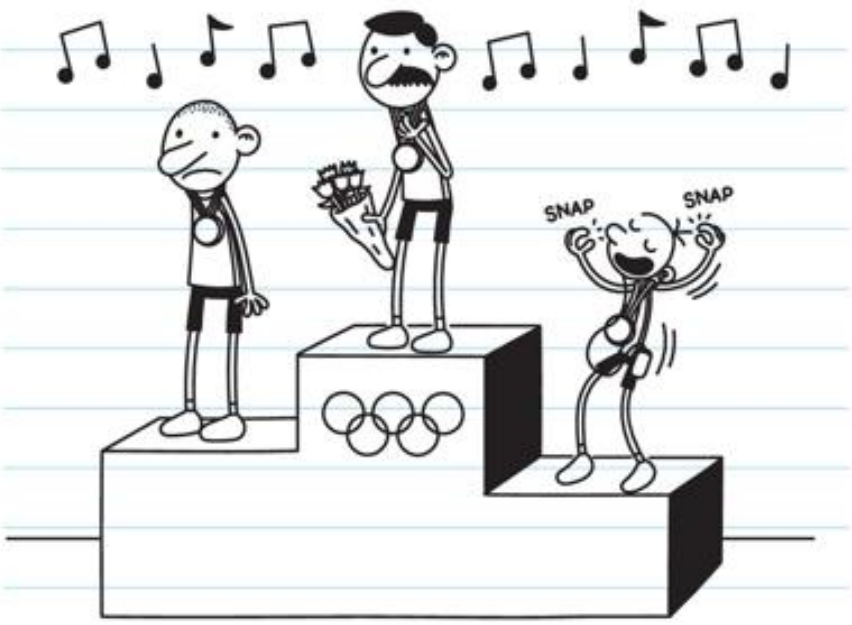
three athletes stand on a podium, and then they

play the gold medallist's national anthem and make

the other two athletes stand there and listen.

But if I took silver or bronze I'd pop in some

earbuds so I could jam to my own tunes.



One of Mom's favourite things about the Olympics

is when they tell the life stories of the athletes

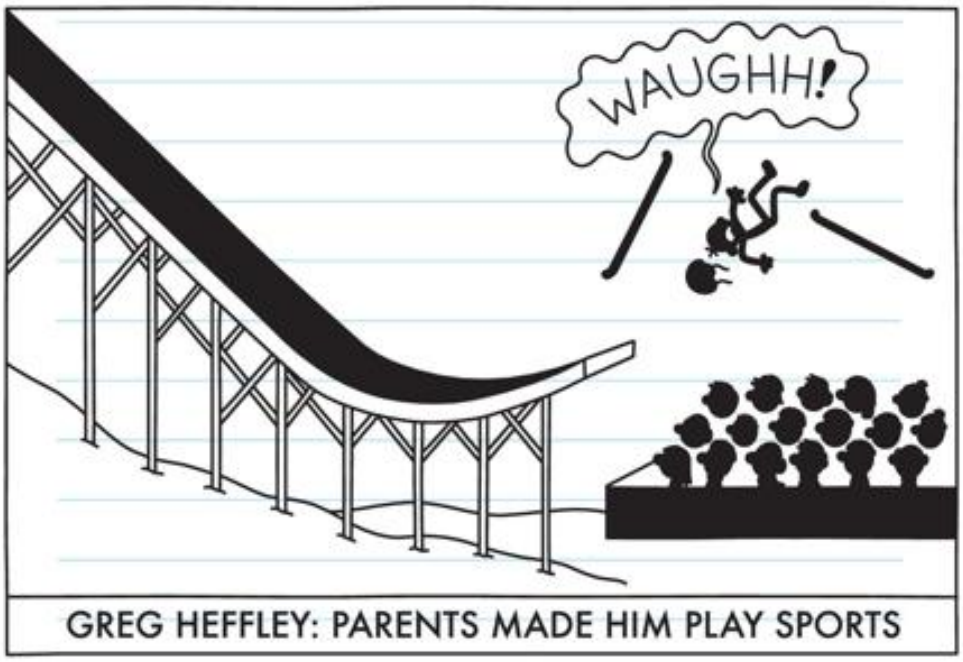
who are competing. Some of the stories are really

inspiring, because a lot of these athletes had to

overcome tough challenges to get where they are.

But if I ever made it to the Olympics my story

wouldn't be all that inspirational.



Mom keeps telling me that one day I could be

an Olympian, and I should start my "Olympic

journey" now. But I'm pretty sure it's already too

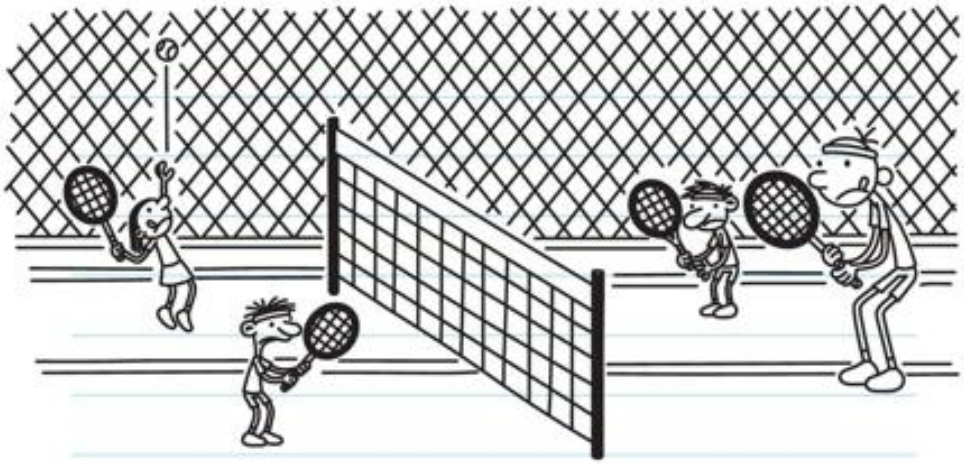
LATE for me.

For most sports, you have to start playing really

young if you wanna be any good. So even if I

got serious I'm sure I'd be competing with kids

who are half my age.



I've heard that in some countries they identify

kids with potential SUPER early, and then they

send them off to these elite academies to train

around the clock.

I really don't think there's any hope for me of

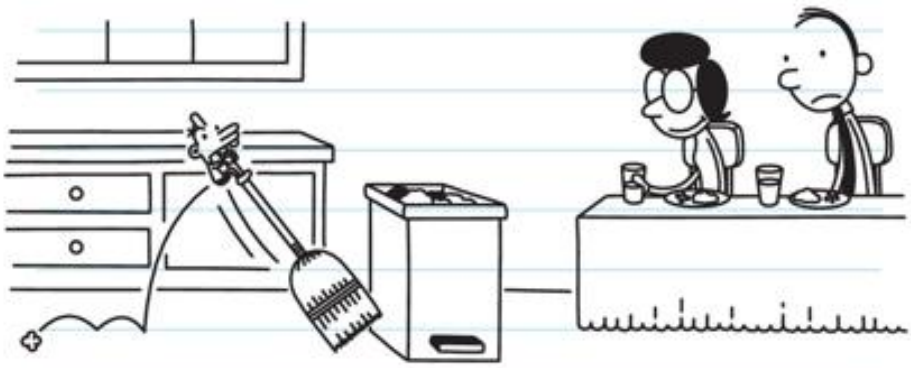
becoming an Olympian. But my brother Manny is

only in pre-school, so maybe he's still got a shot.

I'm not an expert on this stuff or anything, but,

from what I've seen, the kid looks like he's got

POTENTIAL.

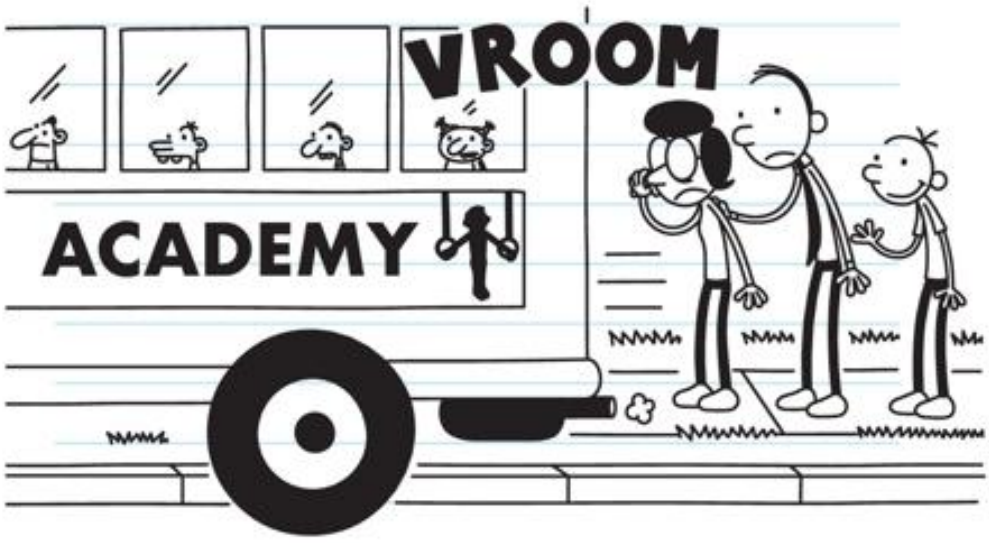


To be honest, I wouldn't mind if Mom and

Dad shipped Manny off to one of those sports

academies. Because that would be one less person

I'd have to share a bathroom with.



But maybe there are some sports that you can start

when you're a little older, and there's still hope for

a person like me. Because it would be pretty cool to

represent your country as an Olympian, no matter

WHAT sport you compete in.

And if I won a GOLD medal you can bet I'd

never take it OFF.

When you win a gold medal, you're set up for

LIFE. And, even when your Olympic career

is over, you can still make a fortune doing

appearances and signing stuff.

But the real money's in advertising products on TV.

And I'd say yes to EVERYTHING as long as the

money was good.

The best thing about being an athlete is that you

can retire YOUNG. And that would be great for

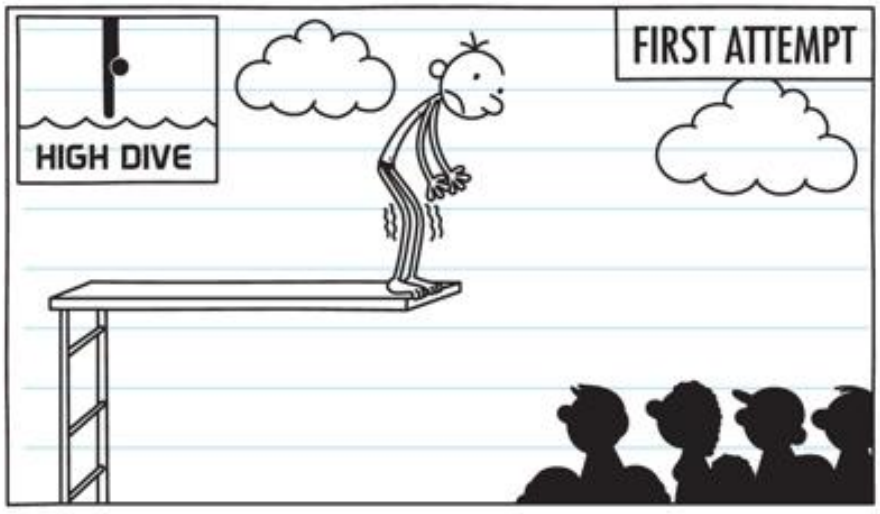
a person like me, because there are lots of places

I'd like to visit and things I'd like to see.

So I'm not going to give up on sports just yet.

Because who knows? Maybe I could be a person

everyone looks up to.



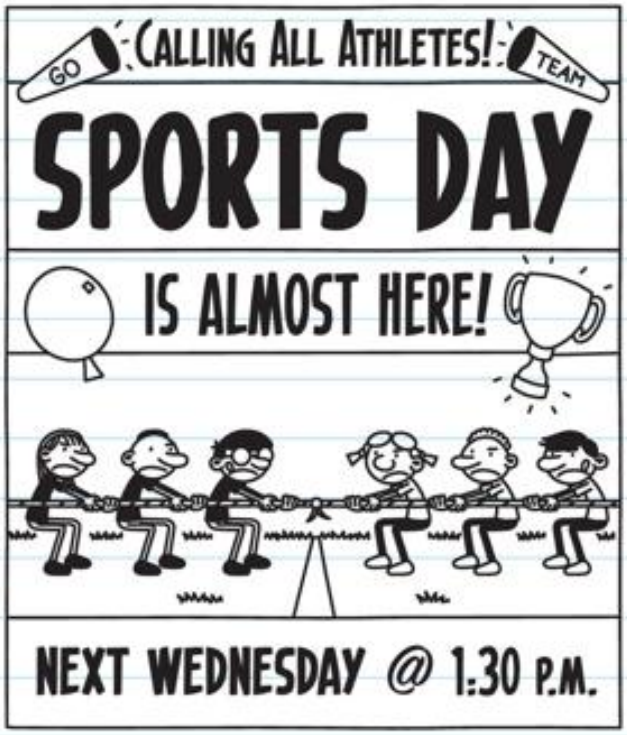
Tuesday

It turns out I'm gonna have a chance to prove

myself sooner than I THOUGHT. When we got

back to school after the summer holidays, there were

posters in the hallways announcing Sports Day.



They have Sports Day at my middle school every

four years, and the last time they held it was

when my brother Rodrick was my age. I remember

him getting excited about the competition because

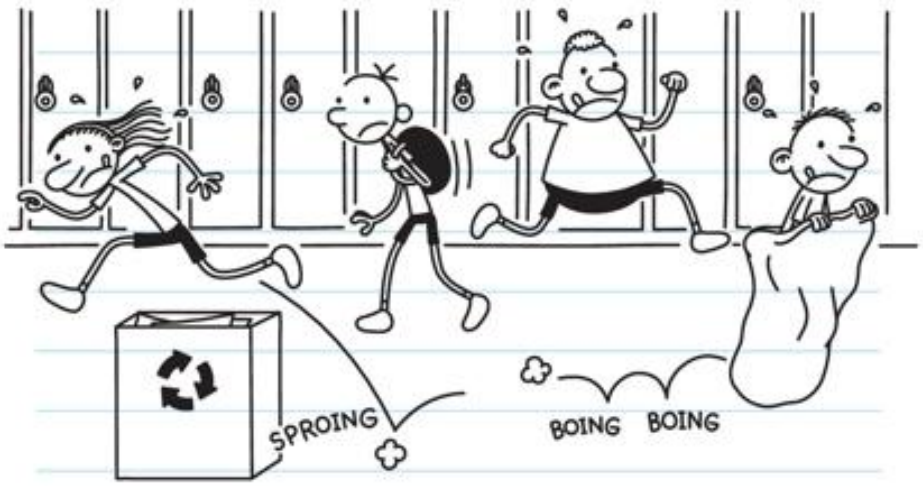
the winning homeroom got free ice cream at lunch.

Well, this year they've raised the stakes. If

your homeroom wins the competition, your class

gets a day off from school. So that has everyone

motivated to WIN.

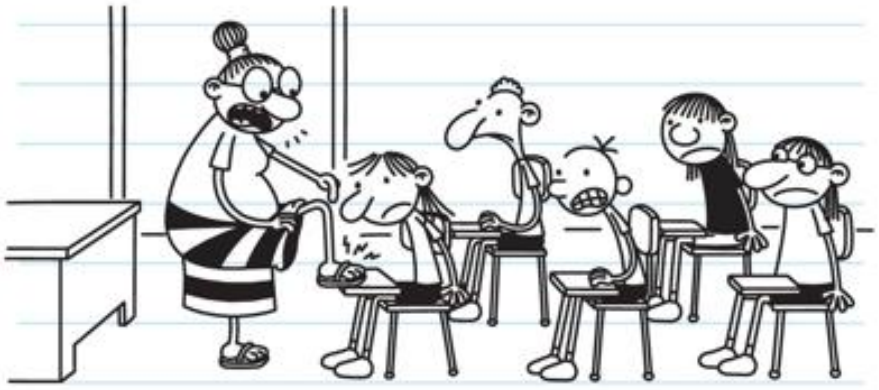


But the person who wants the day off the

MOST is Mrs Bosh, my homeroom teacher. She's

pregnant and is always telling us how hard it is

to be on her feet all day.

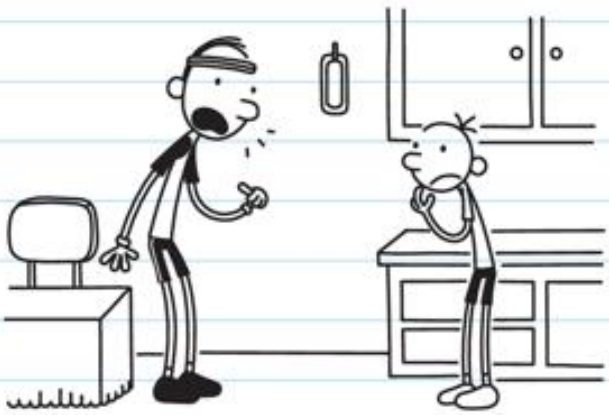


Well, I could use a day off from school, too. I don't want to let Mrs Bosh or the rest of my team down, so I'm actually taking this competition pretty SERIOUSLY.

The thing is, I'm not in the best shape right now. So, unless I do something about it, I won't be able to help us on the big day.

I told Dad I wanted to get in shape, and he said I could start going to the gym with HIM.

I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but Dad's been going to the same gym for years, and whatever he's doing there doesn't really look like it's WORKING.



But I figured anything would be better than

what I've been doing for exercise, which is

nothing. So after dinner I threw on some

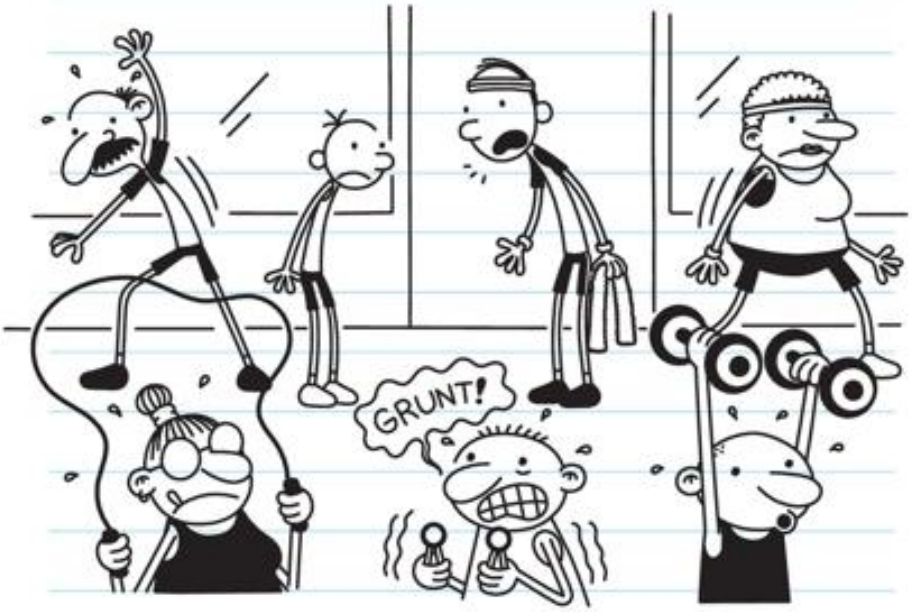
workout clothes and tagged along with Dad.

The gym was packed, but I noticed there weren't

any people MY age there. Dad told me that

technically kids aren't allowed at the gym, but if I

didn't call attention to myself I should be OK.



There was all sorts of fancy equipment that I

couldn't wait to try out. But Dad said it was best

to start off slow, and he took me to the area of

the gym where he likes to work out.

When Dad showed me his exercise routine, I

could understand why he hasn't been getting any

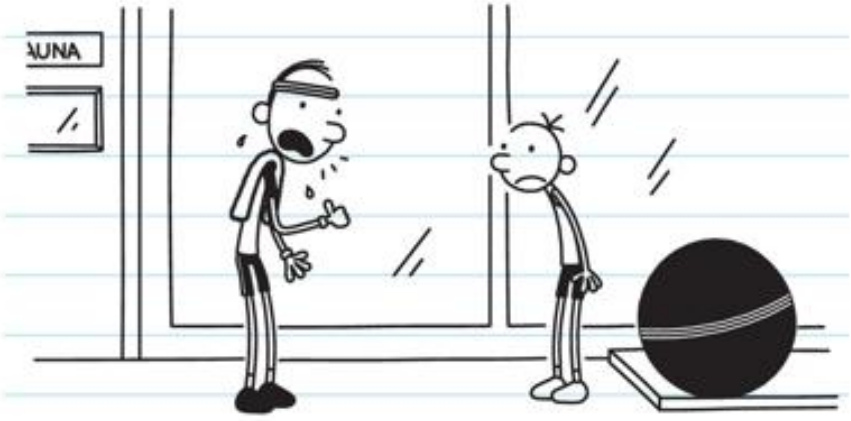
RESULTS.

After Dad did a few sit-ups and jumping jacks,

he said he was gonna go relax in the sauna for a

while. And that meant I was free to exercise on

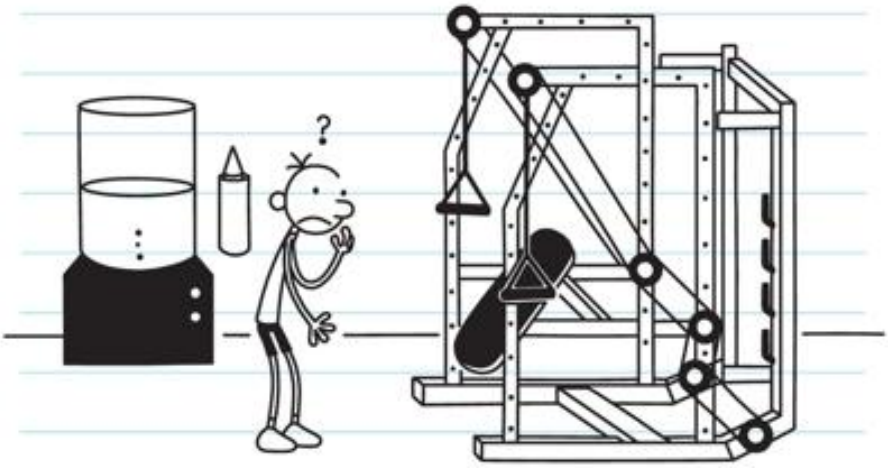
my own.



But the thing is, I didn't really know how to

use any of the machines, because they were all

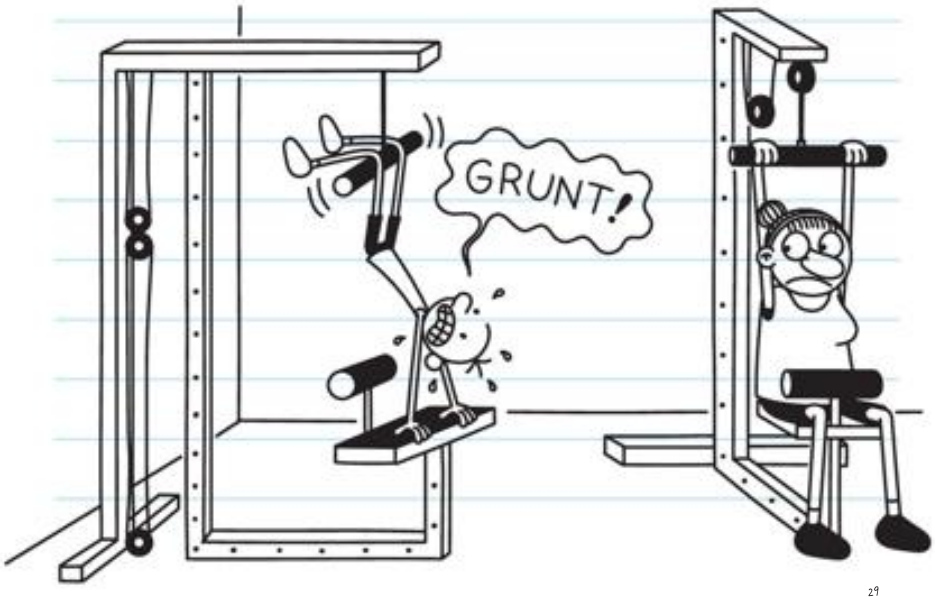
too complicated.



So I had to try to figure things out for

MYSELF, and I'm still not a hundred per cent

sure I was using the equipment the right way.



What I really wanted to do was try out some of

the things with SCREENS on them, like the

treadmills and the elliptical machines. But people

were hogging that equipment and staying on longer

than they were supposed to.

And even when I gave them a gentle reminder

that it was time to let someone ELSE have a

turn, nobody seemed to take the hint.

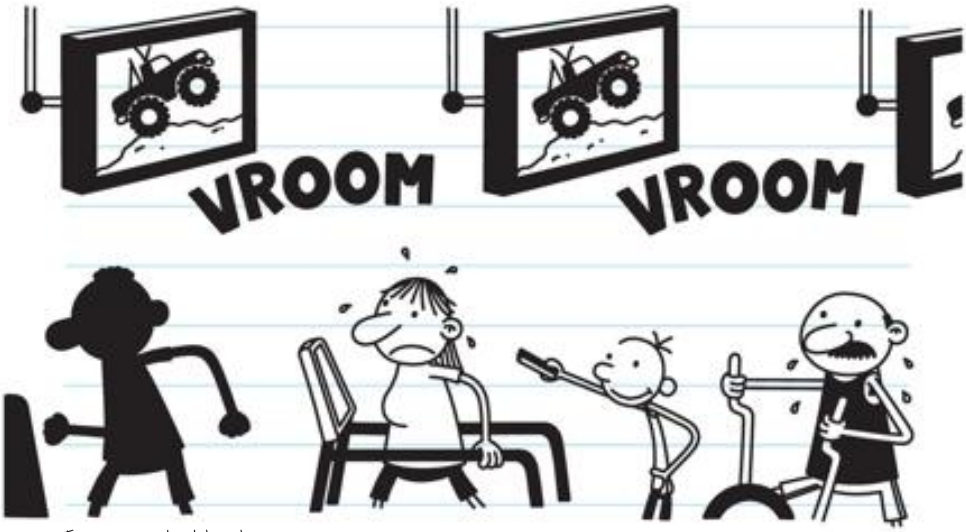
While I was waiting to get on one of the machines,

I passed the time by watching V. But the TVs

were all tuned to some boring business programme.

So I found the remote and changed the channel

to something a little more INTERESTING.

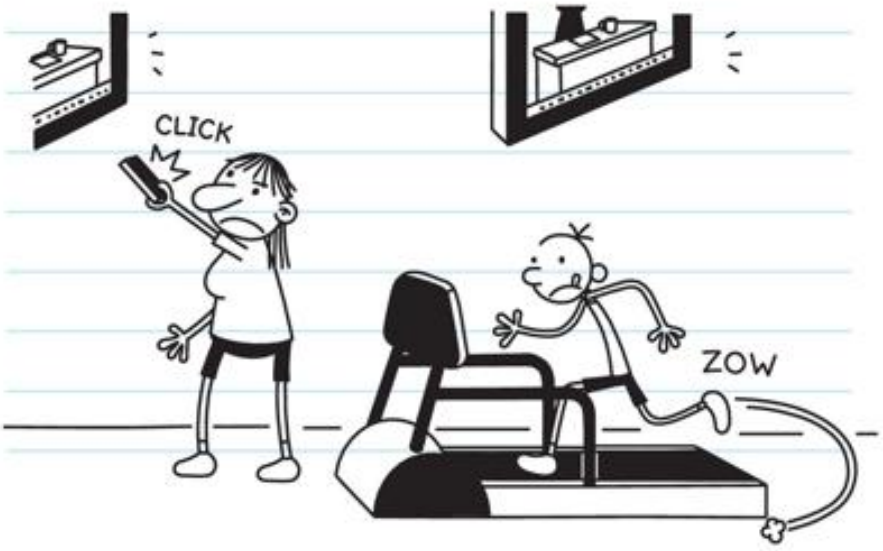


I guess everyone doesn't have the same taste in

entertainment as me, because some lady got off the

treadmill to change the channel. And, as soon as she

stepped off the machine, I jumped at my chance.



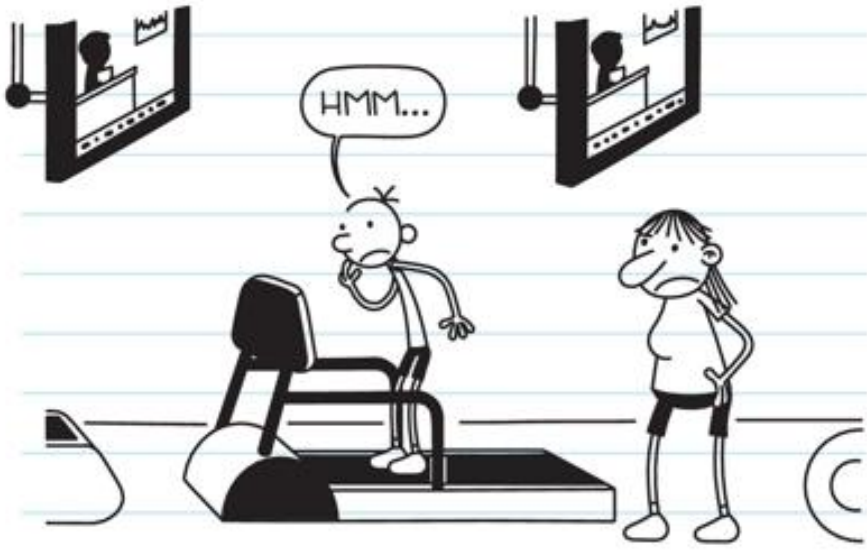
There was a big screen on the front of the

treadmill, and you could choose between all these

famous places to take your walk.

So I spent a few minutes trying to decide where

I wanted to GO.



After I made my choice the treadmill started

moving, and I felt like I was actually walking

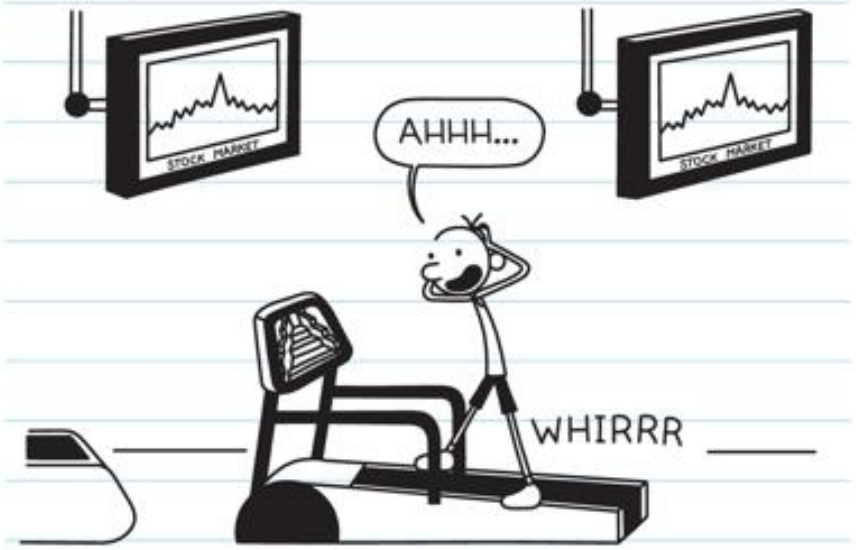
along the Great Wall of China.

But I guess the Great Wall is STEEP, and I

was having trouble keeping up. So after a while I

put my feet on either side of the conveyor belt and

took in the sights the EASY way.



I realized I wasn't making the most of my time

at the gym, and I started feeling a little guilty

about it. But I didn't know what I should do

NEXT because I was running out of options.

That's when I heard some weird noises coming from

the other room, and I went to investigate.

It turns out there was a whole different area of

the gym, and it looked like this was where all the

SERIOUS people hung out.

I wanted to look like THESE guys, but I didn't know how to get started. And when I went around asking for advice I found out that nobody was in the mood for chit-chat.

After a while, I realized the people in there weren't interested in helping a beginner like me, so I was on my OWN. And the first thing I had to decide was which muscles to start working on.

I figured I should probably focus on my arms and chest, because those are the muscles that make you look like you're in shape.

So I decided I'd start with a few bicep curls and

go from there. But I didn't want to overdo it,

because at lunch yesterday Albert Sandy told us

about this bodybuilder who blew out a bicep, and I

sure didn't want that happening to ME.

It turns out I didn't need to stress about it,

because I couldn't even get any of the dumb-bells

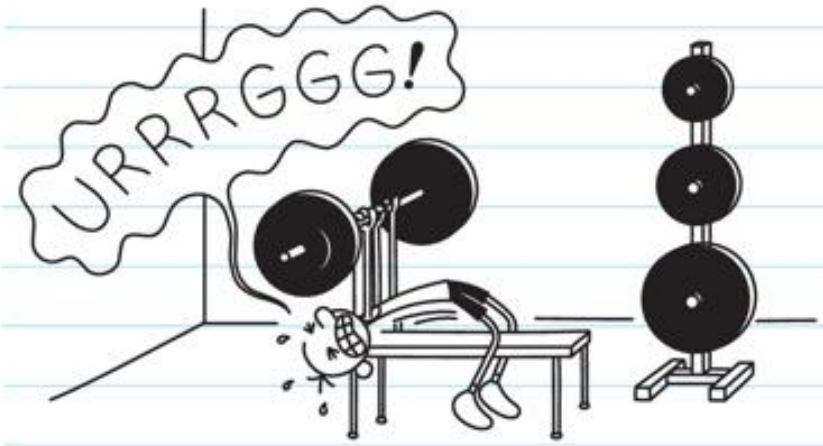
off the rack.

I thought I might have better luck with the

bench press, but I couldn't budge the barbell,

either. And, I have to admit, I was getting a

little FRUSTRATED.

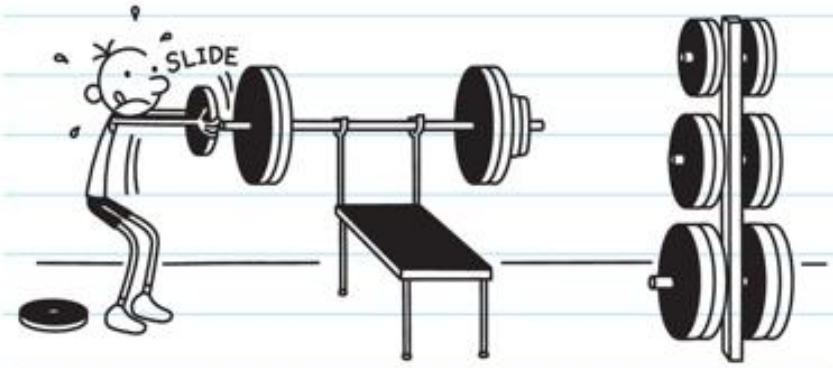


By now people were staring at me, and I didn't

want to look like I didn't know what I was

doing. So I started taking the weights off the

barbell to make it a little lighter.



But it turns out you're not supposed to take the

weights off one side of the barbell all at ONCE,

because, when you do, everything slides off the

other side. And apparently people in the weight

room don't like loud noises.

So I guess that's the reason why they don't let

kids in the gym. But it doesn't seem right that

they kicked Dad out, too, because he really has

been a loyal member.

Thursday

Mom said that, when it comes to getting in

shape, exercise is only HALF the picture. She said

nutrition is just as important, and she'd be happy

to teach me a few things about eating right if I

really wanted to learn.

I didn't feel like getting a lecture about food,

but I jumped at the chance to go with her to the

grocery store. And that's because I wanted to

help pick out the food we'd have in the pantry.

Whenever Manny goes to the store with Mom, he

picks the things HE wants. And that's why we

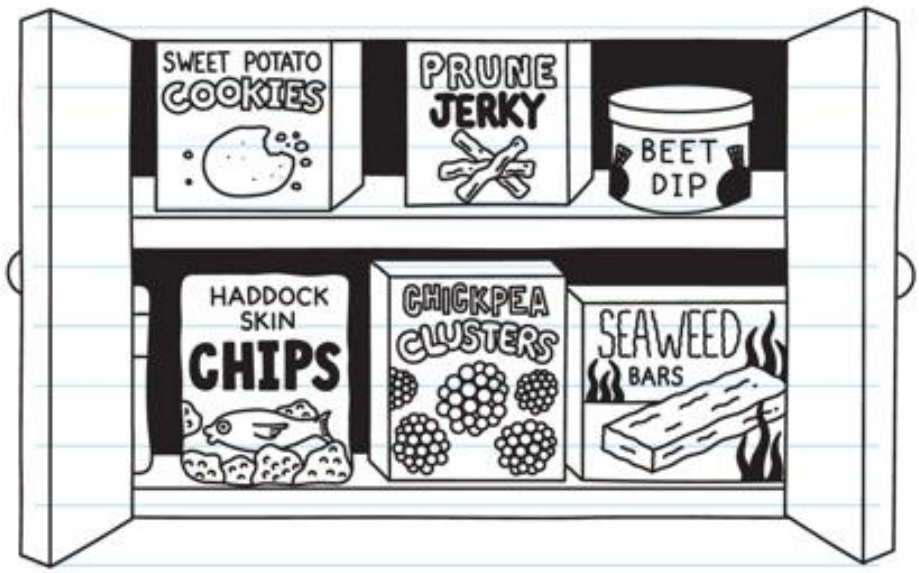
have all this random stuff in our cabinets.

No offence to Mom or anything, but she's

TERRIBLE at picking out snacks. She always buys

healthy stuff that tastes awful, and she won't buy

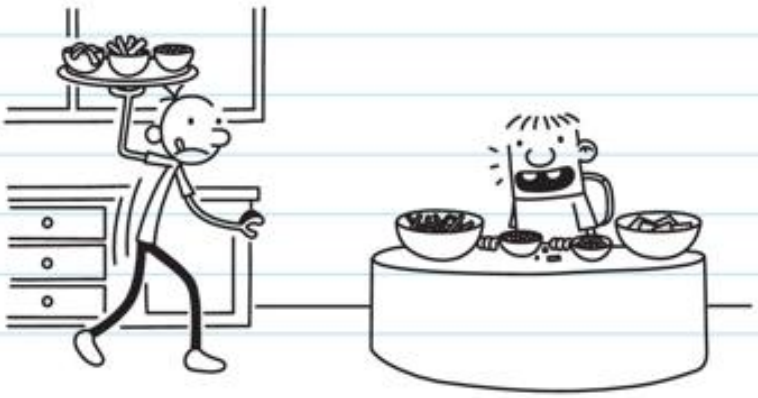
any NEW snacks until we've eaten all the old ones.



So lately I've been having my best friend, Rowley,

over for "tasting parties" to help me clear space

in the cabinets.



When we got to the grocery store today, I split

off from Mom, then loaded up the trolley with

a bunch of my favourites. Then I grabbed a few

healthy items just to make Mom happy.

But it turns out MY idea of health food isn't the

same as MOM'S. When we met up again, she went

over each item I picked out and explained why it

wasn't good for me.

She held up a bottle of fruit juice, which I

thought was a pretty solid choice on my part.

But Mom said it was full of SUGAR and there

wasn't any nutritional value to it. I told Mom she

was wrong, because there was a picture of tons of

different fruits right there on the bottle.

Then Mom showed me the label, and I couldn't

believe they can even get away with that.

Mom said that, if you really want to know what's

in the food you buy, you have to read the list of

ingredients. And she told me the cans of Chef

Marinara pasta I had in the trolley were full of

all sorts of CHEMICALS.

But I knew Mom was wrong about THAT one,

because I've seen the Chef Marinara ads on

television that show him making his pasta by hand

in Old Italy.

Mom showed me the small print on the back of the

can, which said the food was made in a factory in

Detroit. She said Chef Marinara probably wasn't

even a real person, and they just hired an actor

for those TV ads.

Well, that made me feel pretty stupid for

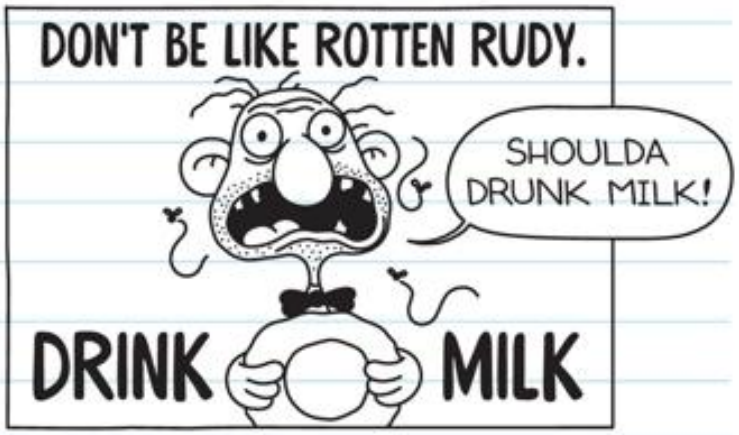
dressing up as Chef Marinara in our Wax Figure

Exhibit at school last year.

Then I started to wonder if Rotten Rudy was a

real person, because those Rotten Rudy TV ads

scared me into drinking a gallon of milk every day.

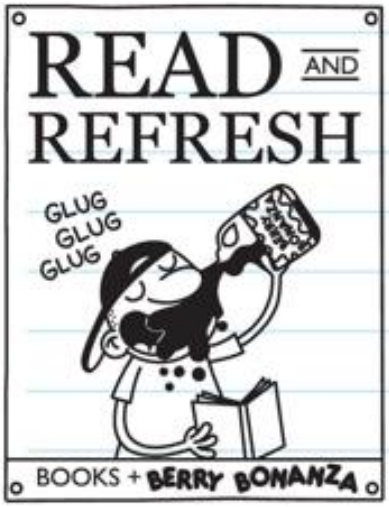


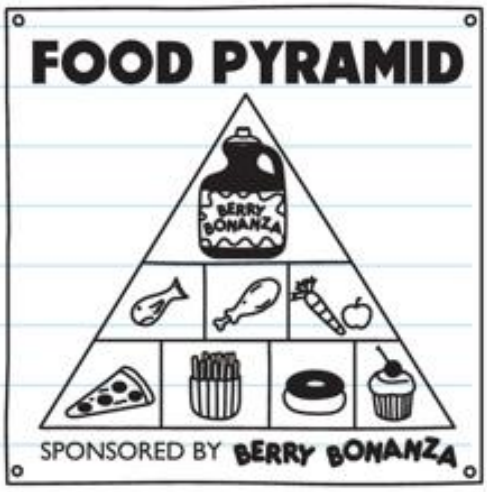
Mom said food companies are really clever about

slipping their advertising into places you wouldn't

expect, which made me think about the posters

that are up in our hallways at school.





She explained that sometimes packaged-food

companies use cartoon characters to get young

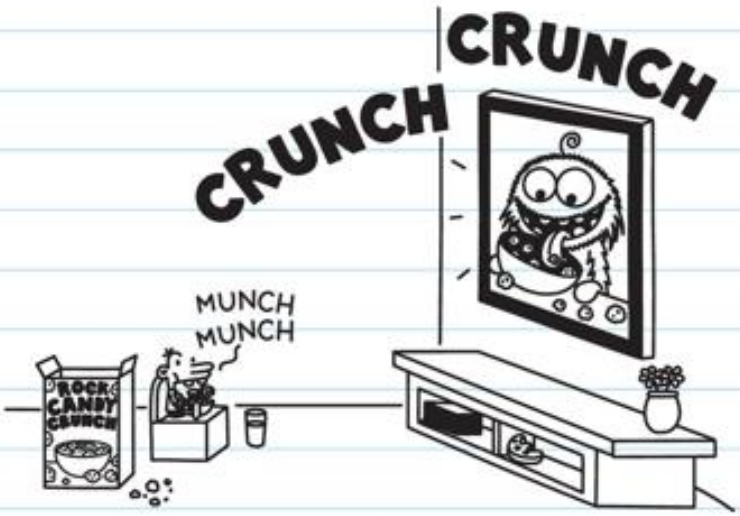
kids to want their products. And I think she's

right, because before we left the house today

Manny was watching an episode of "The Murples"

where Munchy Murple was chowing down on a bowl

of Rock Candy Crunch cereal.



Mom told me that when she buys food for the

family she checks the labels and doesn't buy

anything with ingredients she can't pronounce.

Then she said the best thing to do is buy

food with only ONE ingredient, like fruit and

vegetables.

Well, I don't know if it's just my generation, but

it's a little hard for a kid like me to eat something

that isn't wrapped in cellophane or doesn't come in

a cardboard box. In fact, if chocolate bars grew

in the ground, I'll bet I wouldn't TOUCH them.

But, if the people who sell fruit and vegetables

wanna get kids eating that stuff, they're gonna

need to step up their advertising game.

Tuesday

Sports Day is tomorrow, and things have really started to heat up at school.

Mrs Bosh has been making everyone in our homeroom get to class half an hour early so we have extra time to put together our strategy.

And she's been getting paranoid about what the OTHER classrooms are doing to prepare.

So today she sent Ledavian Mills up into the ceiling so he could spy on Mr Drew's homeroom next door. But it turns out that ceiling tiles aren't strong enough to hold a person's weight.

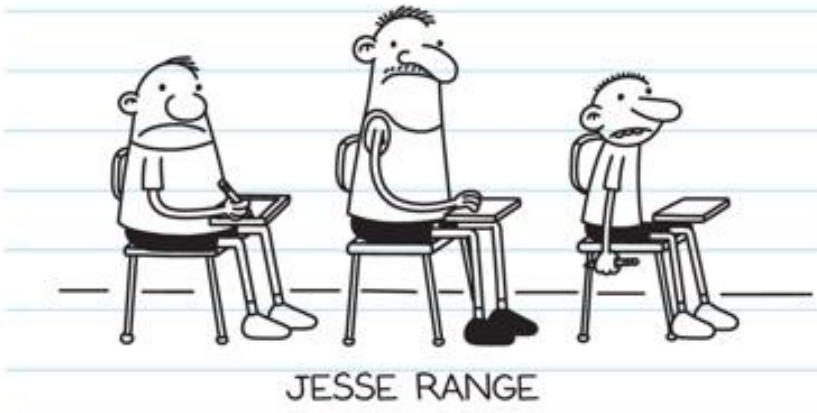
The homeroom Mrs Bosh is most worried about is

Mrs Epstein's, because she's got a bunch of athletes

in her class. And one of the kids is Jesse Range,

who stayed back in eighth grade TWICE just so

he could compete in Sports Day one more time.

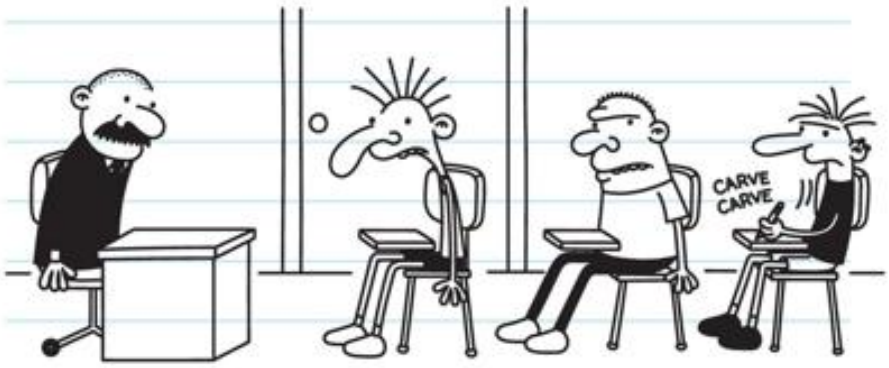


But the team I'm most nervous about is Mr Ray's

class, because that's the morning detention

homeroom. And on Sports Day I'm sure those

guys are gonna play DIRTY.



To make matters worse, we found out we're going

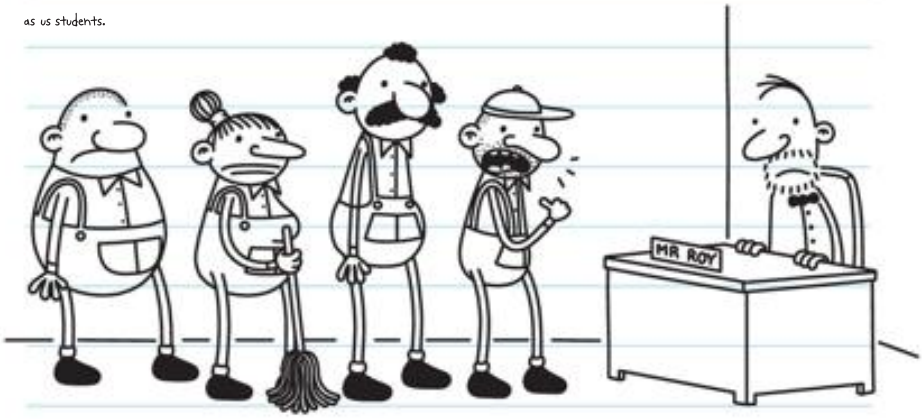
to be competing with GROWN-UPS in this

thing. The janitors went to the vice principal and

said they wanted to put together their OWN

team because they deserve a day off just as much

as us students.



I guess that's fair, but the bathrooms have been

getting pretty grotty ever since they started

spending all their time TRAINING.

And now the lunch ladies are getting in on the

act, so the cafeteria has basically turned into a

gymnasium.

The homeroom teachers are getting pretty

spooked, so they've started TRADING kids to

improve their team's chances. Mr Esper sent the

fastest girl in our school, Ava Hollis, to Mrs Joy's

class, and he got Thomas Scheff, who's apparently

a specialist in the sponge toss.

All this trading has got Mrs Bosh thinking about

making some moves of her OWN.

She even gave me the job of scouting kids from

some of the other homerooms to see who we should

recruit for OUR team.

That's why it stung when Mrs Bosh traded me

and two other kids for Jesse Range, and threw

in a pack of dry-erase markers to close the deal.

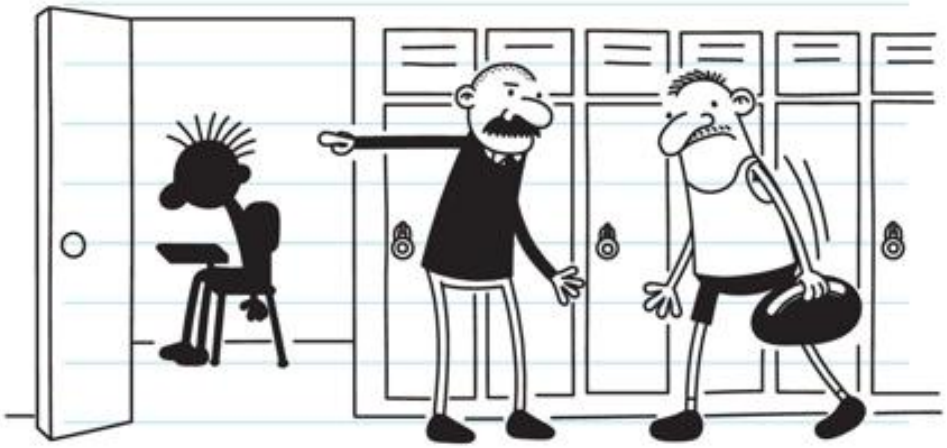
Thursday

Yesterday was Sports Day at school, and it

started off with some controversy. Before the

first bell, Mr Ray gave Jesse Range detention

just so he could steal Jesse for his team.



So that meant Mr Ray's team was totally

STACKED, and the rest of us didn't stand a

chance.

Before Sports Day kicked off, Mrs Epstein

gathered our team on the playground to go over

strategy and make some last-minute adjustments.

But I still couldn't figure out why she wanted me

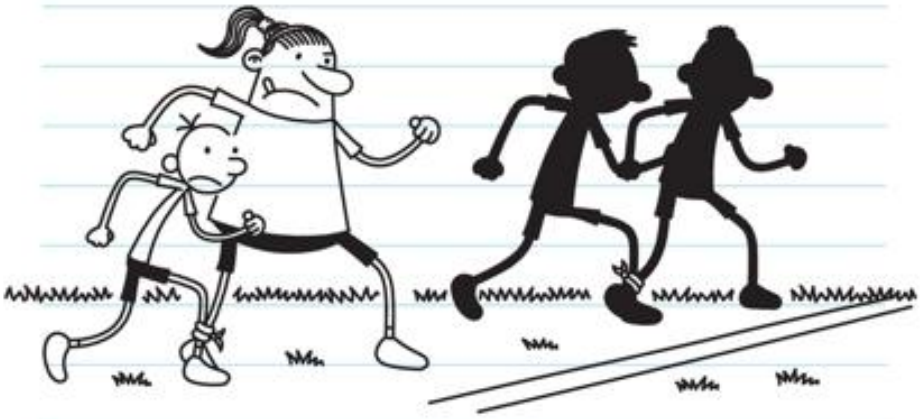
and those other two kids instead of Jesse Range.

I was only signed up for one event, which was

the three-legged race. My partner was Madison

Burke, who's about a foot taller than me, which

made things kind of awkward.



But when the race started I finally understood

Mrs Epstein's strategy. She didn't trade for me

because I'm FAST. She traded for me because I'm

LIGHT.

Me and Madison took first place, and our team was off to a good start. But we had a big setback a few minutes later when Marcello Romera twisted an ankle in the sack race. It turns out the lunch ladies had left some POTATOES in a few of the sacks, and I'll bet that wasn't an ACCIDENT.

Marcello was supposed to run the fifty-metre sprint next, and all the other kids on our team were in the middle of events. So Mrs Epstein told me I was gonna have to fill in for him.

I got second-to-last place because I was still kind of bashed up from the three-legged race. But I can't really run fast unless I'm MOTIVATED.

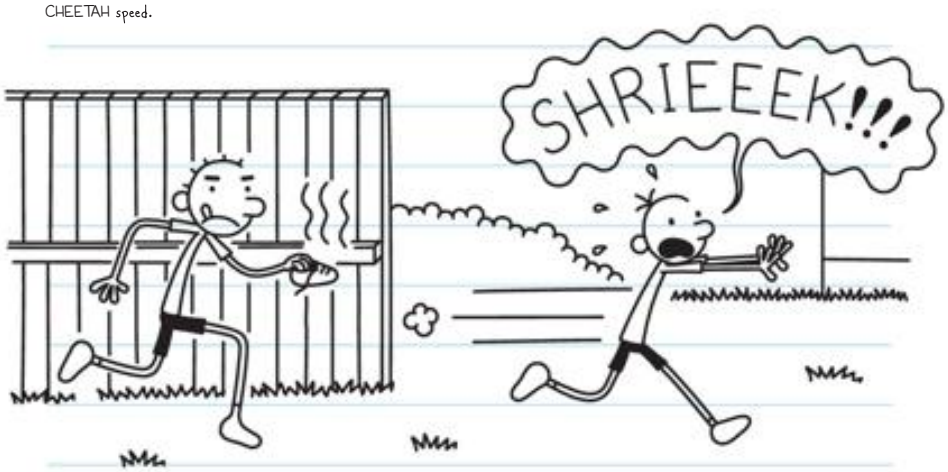
The fastest I've ever run was when I got chased

by Rodrick after he stepped in dog poop and I

laughed at him. I guarantee you if someone had

been timing me that day I would've clocked in at

CHEETAH speed.



The only reason I didn't get last place in the

fifty-metre sprint was because as soon as the race

started Jesse Range fell flat on his face. And

when that happened I figured he must've tripped

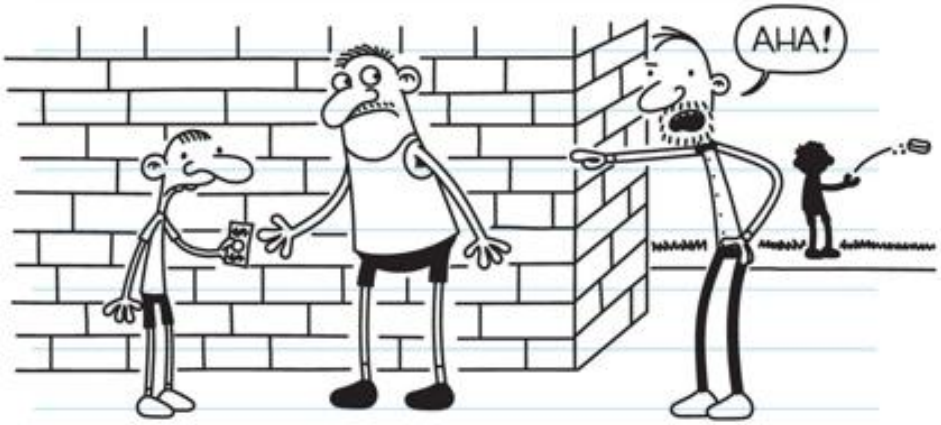
over his shoelaces or something.

But it turns out he got paid to take a dive, and

no one would've found out if Vice Principal Roy

hadn't caught him red-handed after the race

accepting his payment behind the school.



Jesse didn't want to get suspended, so he gave up

the kids who were in on the betting scheme. And

those guys had a whole gambling operation running

out of the media room on the second floor.

The rest of Mr Ray's team was cheating, too, but

that didn't surprise anyone.

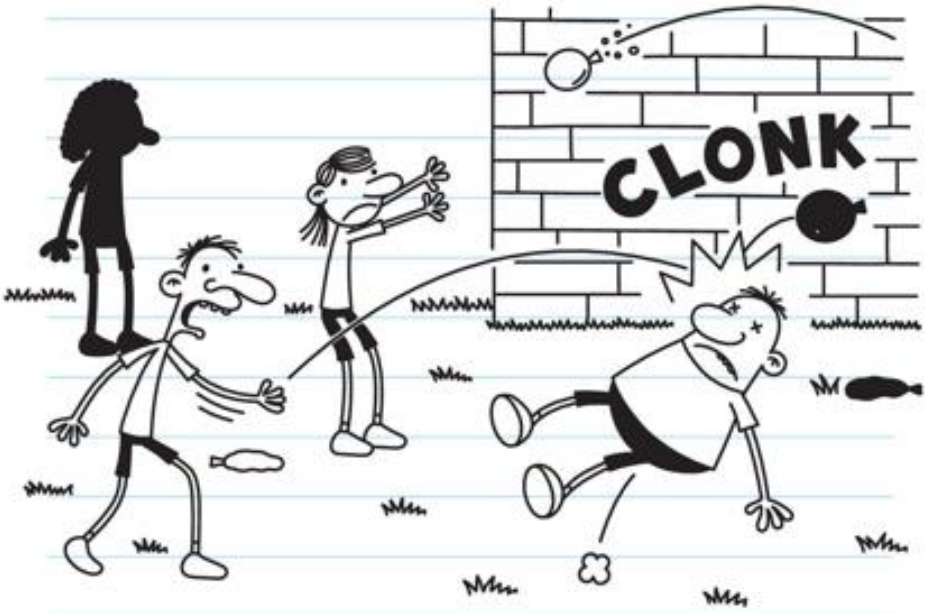
Those kids had stored their water balloons in

the cafeteria freezer, and the only reason they

got CAUGHT is because George Ralston knocked

Mikey Ardalla out cold with a bad throw in the

balloon toss.



Mrs Bosh's team won beanbag bingo, and that

put them ahead in the standings for a while.

But then Mr Chow's team had back-to-back

victories in the water-bucket relay and the

sponge toss, so then THEY took the lead.

The janitors' team started moving up in the

rankings, and they probably would've taken the top

spot if Mr Washington's arms hadn't given out

during the wheelbarrow race.

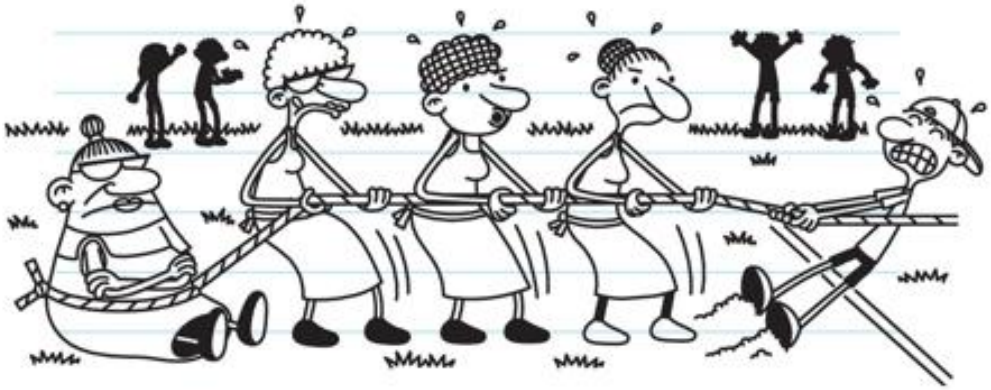
The final event was the tug-of-war, and it

came down to Mrs Bosh's team versus the lunch

ladies. I thought Mrs Bosh's team was gonna win

for SURE, but the lunch ladies outlasted them

thanks to a solid job of anchoring by Mrs Frolley.



When we got back to our classrooms after the

competition, we were all bummed out that the

cafeteria ladies were the ones to win the day off

from school. And we were nervous because we

heard the janitors were gonna have to fill in for

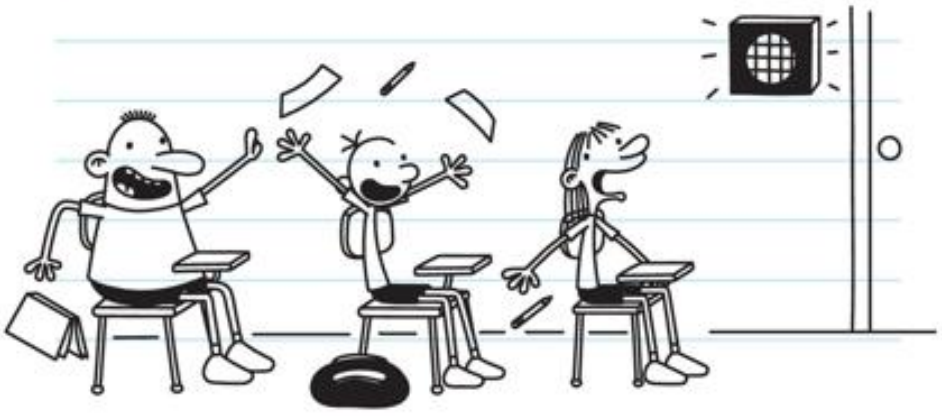
them during lunch.

But I guess the school knew it was going to be

an ugly scene, so, right before the last bell rang,

Vice Principal Roy made an announcement that

EVERYONE would be getting Friday off.



Friday

I was excited about having a whole day where I

didn't have to do anything and was looking forward

to sleeping in.

But as soon as Mom found out about my day off

she filled it up with a bunch of appointments that

she'd been wanting to schedule.

I was in a bad mood all day, but Mom was really

chatty. She wanted to know about Sports Day

and if I had fun. So I told her the truth,

which was that it totally STUNK.

Mom said the reason I've never had a good

experience with sports is because I've never been

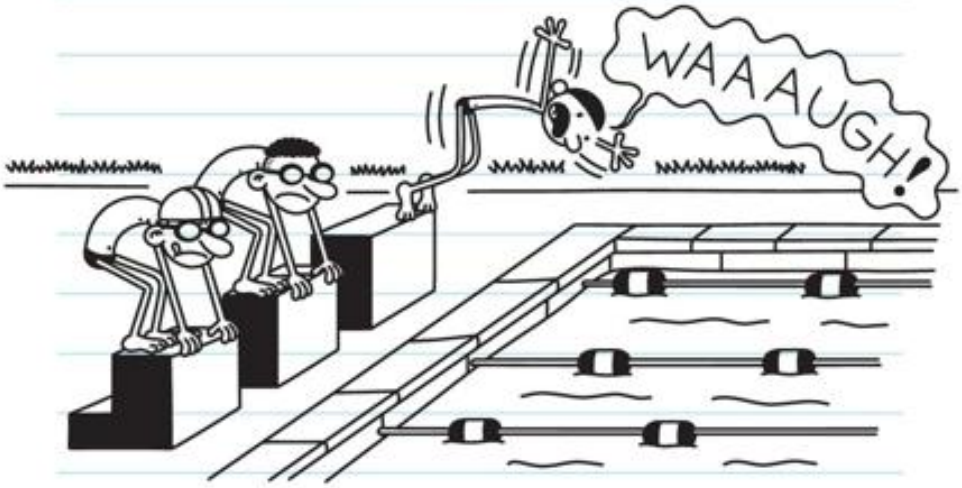
part of a team.

But I told her I was on a team for Sports Day,

and I've been on a bunch of OTHER sports

teams, too. So I figured maybe she'd just blocked

out those memories like I wish I could.



But Mom said what she's talking about is being

part of a REAL team where everyone has your

back. She said some of her happiest times as a kid

were when she played sports in middle school.

Mom said that what's great about being part of a

team is that you learn how to work together, and

you can use those skills for the rest of your life,

especially in your JOB.

That sounds a little corny to me, but I guess I

don't really know how grown-ups act when they're

at work.

Mom said she wants me to give team sports one

more shot, and if it doesn't work out she won't

bug me about it any more. So I told her I'd

think it over, but really I'm just hoping she

forgets in a day or two.

I don't understand why people get so wrapped up

in sports, because it seems to me there are more

IMPORTANT things in life.

If you can throw a baseball at 100 miles per hour,

you'll make millions of dollars and kids will have your

poster on their wall.

But if you're the person who ends up curing cancer,

you'll be lucky if you get a pat on the back.

I've always wondered how sports got started in the FIRST place. In ancient times, people were always at war, and I guess they decided they needed to figure out a way they could settle their differences without KILLING each other. So someone came up with the idea of sports as a more peaceful solution.

But, over time, sports EVOLVED, and nowadays you've got team mascots and cheerleaders and professional athletes.

I've only been to one professional sports match in my life, and that was when my dad took me into the city to watch a football game. To be honest, I don't remember much about the game itself, but I do remember everything ELSE about that day.

Dad didn't want to spend money to park near the stadium, so we ended up about a mile away in a muddy field. He broke out his portable grill, and we cooked burgers, which was actually kind of fun.

But I drank WAY too much soda, and on our walk to the stadium I knew I had to find a bathroom or I was gonna wet my pants.

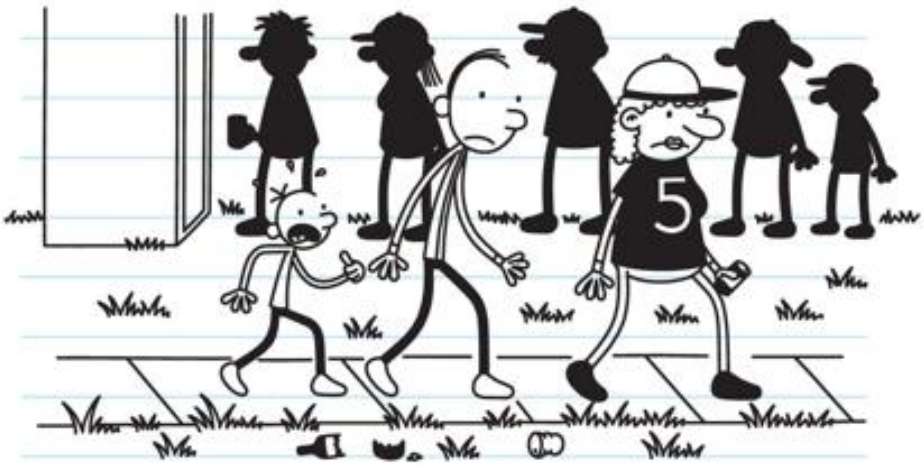
Dad didn't want to stop at one of the Portaloos

because the lines for those were too long. But I

told him I didn't think I could make it all the

way to the stadium, so I begged him to let me

pull over.



I had to wait twenty minutes in line, and finally

it was my turn. But I wished Dad had given me

a little advance warning about what those things

were like inside, because I would've just HELD it.

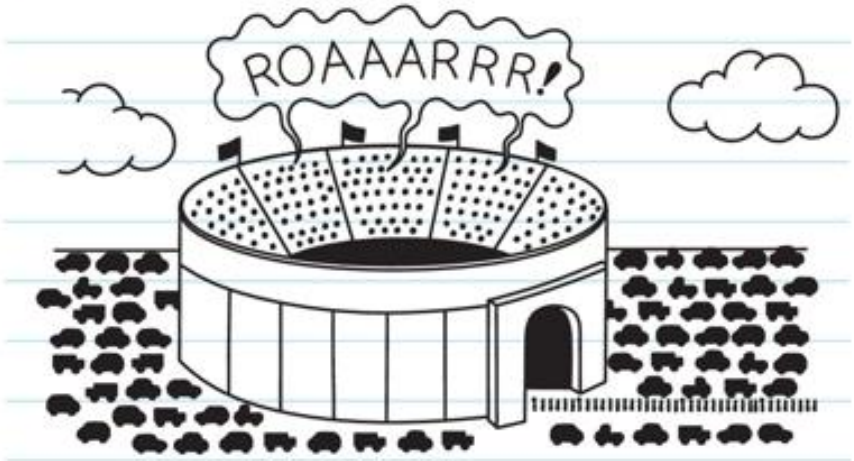
It was a smart move making that pit stop,

though, because when we got to the stadium there

was ANOTHER long line for security. And we

missed the whole first quarter of the game waiting

to get in.



When we finally got inside and found our seats,

there were some guys sitting in them. And it took

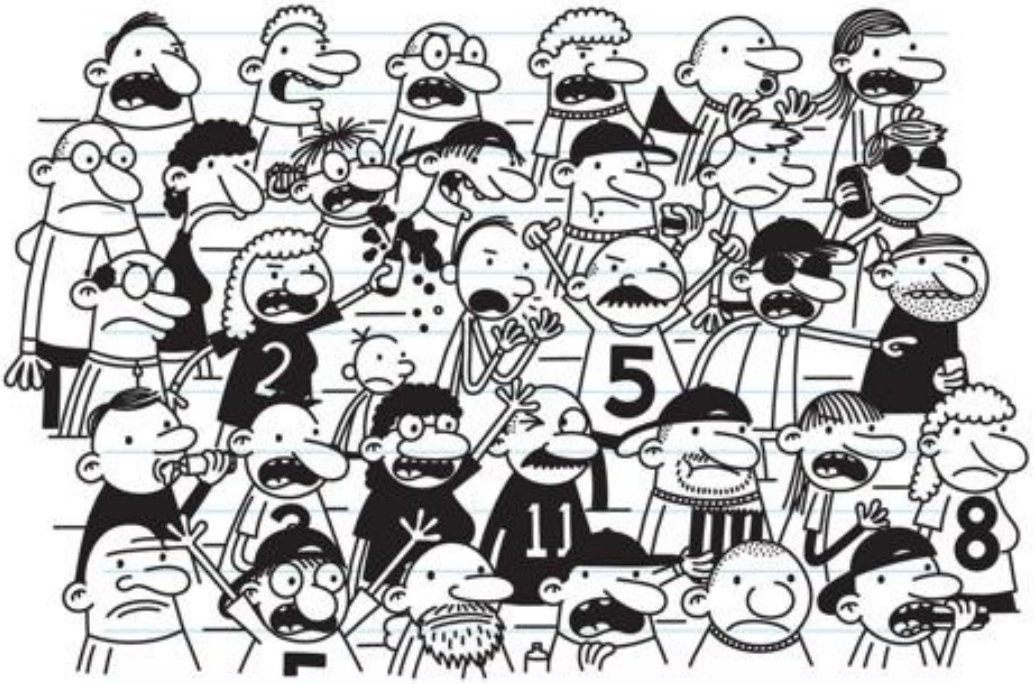
forever to sort THAT out.

I don't know why they even bother to have seats,

because no one was SITTING in them anyway.

And most of the people in our section were too big

for somebody my height to see around.



Since I couldn't see the field, I had no idea what

was happening. And Dad was too wrapped up in

the game to tell me what was going on.

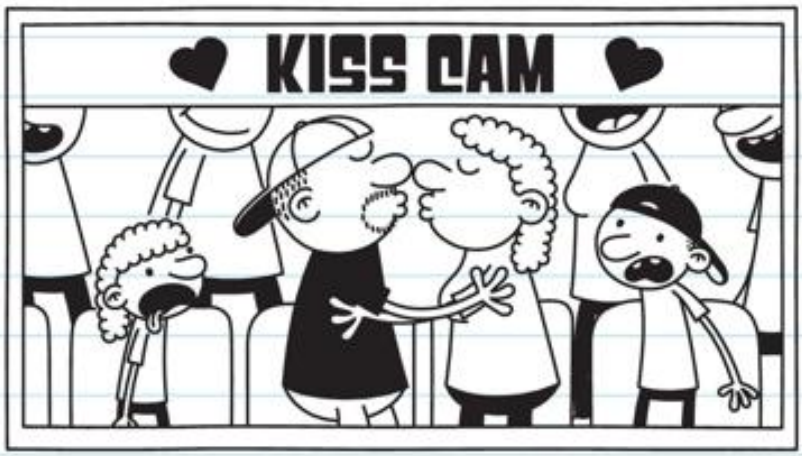
Eventually I realized I could see the game if I

just watched it on the Jumbotron, which is this

giant screen that hangs high above the pitch.

Whenever there was a pause in the action, they

turned the cameras on the fans.



They had this thing called "Fan of the Game",

where you could win a prize by acting crazy when

they put you up on the screen. And some people

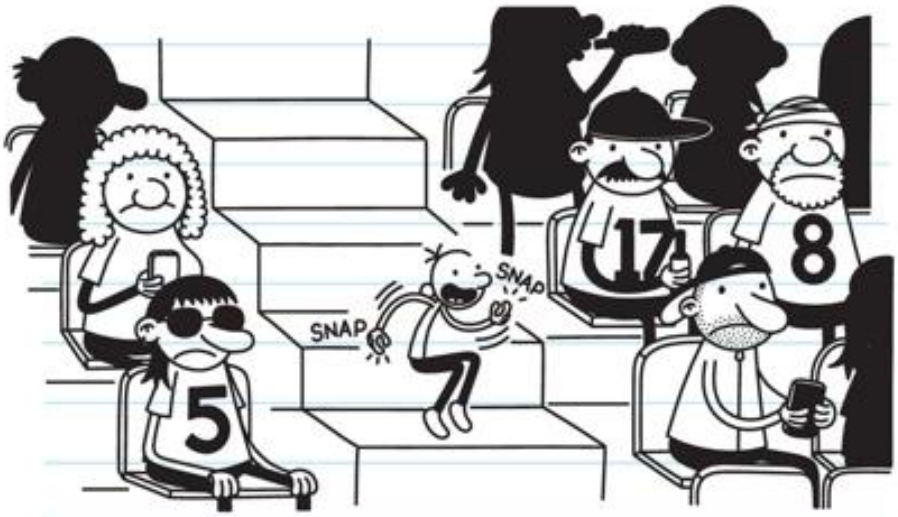
were really GOING for it.

I knew there was no chance of me winning Fan

of the Game if I was behind a bunch of people.

So during a time-out I stepped into the aisle and

really hammed it up for the cameras.



But I guess I was embarrassing Dad, so he gave

me some money and told me I should go up to the

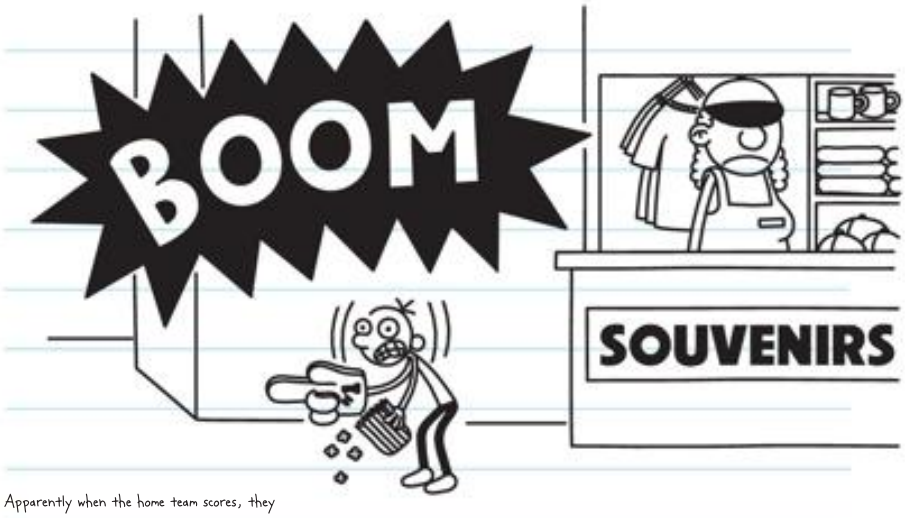
concourse and get some snacks and a souvenir.

I spent my money on popcorn and one of those

giant foam fingers. But when I turned to walk

away from the souvenir stand there was a loud

noise that shook the whole stadium.



Apparently when the home team scores, they

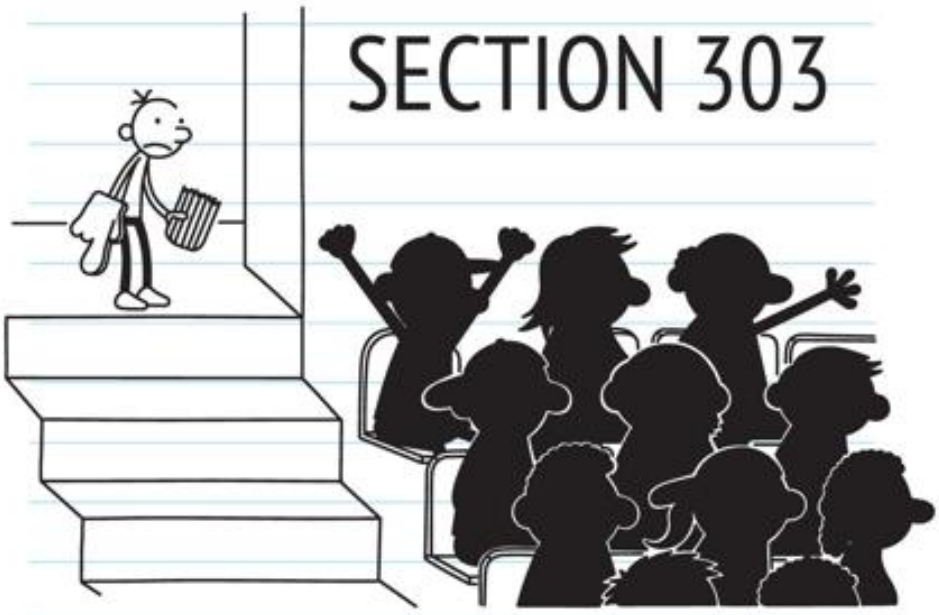
shoot off a CANNON. But I wished Dad had

warned me that might happen, because I seriously

thought we were in DANGER.

After I was sure the coast was clear, I went to find Dad. But I couldn't remember which section we were sitting in, and Dad was the one who had our tickets.

I started to panic, because there were 80,000 people in that stadium, and everyone looked the same from behind. Plus, the game was tied, and the fans were too distracted to help some lost kid.

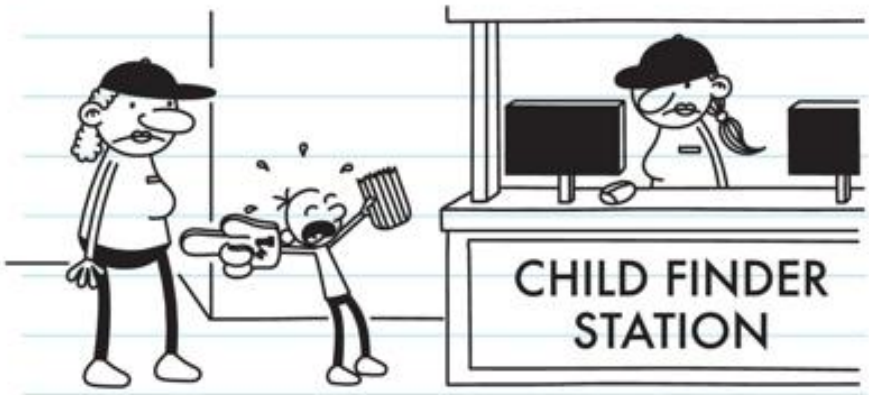


Luckily an usher saw me wandering around the concourse and took me to the Child Finder Station.

They asked me a few questions about who I was and

where I last saw my father, but by then I was so

shook up I could barely even remember my own name.

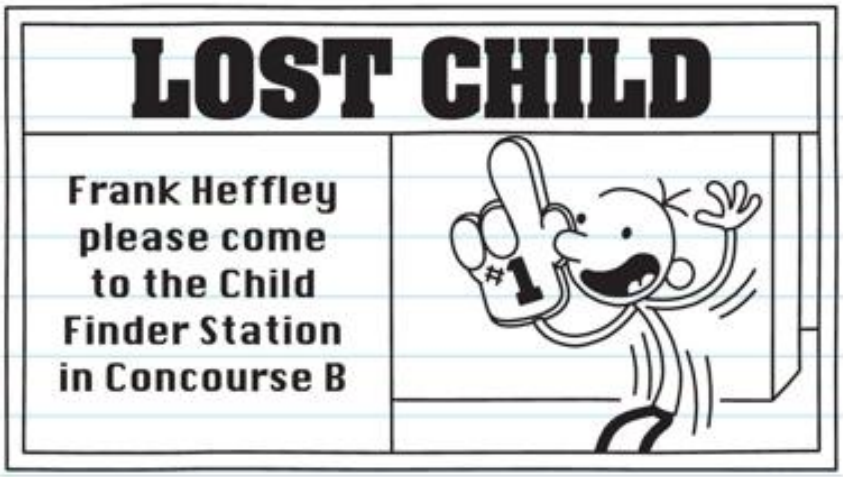


The next thing I knew, I had a camera in my

face and they put me on the Jumbotron.

Then I realized this was my chance to win Fan of

the Game, so I made the most of my opportunity.



The good news was that our team won in the last

second. The bad news was that Dad didn't get

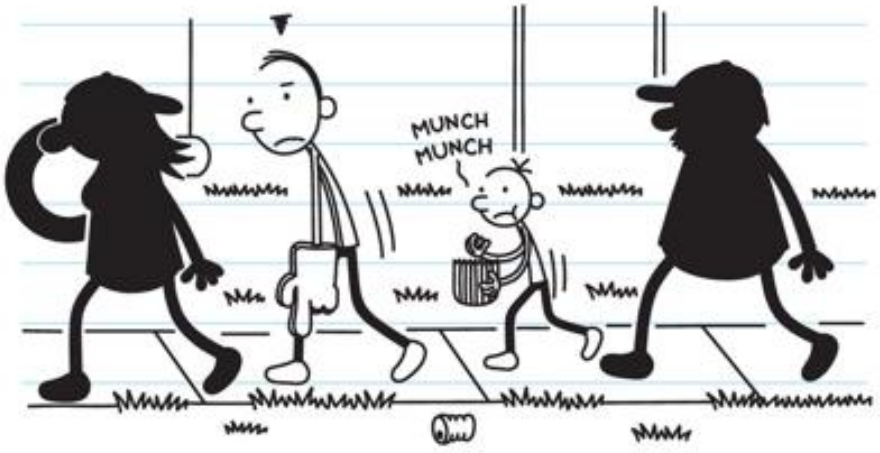
to see it because he had to come get ME. And,

believe it or not, I DID win Fan of the Game,

and we got two free tickets to the NEXT match.

But I don't remember going to another game after

that, so I think Dad must've taken Rodrick.



What really stuck with me about that day was how

they tried to keep things entertaining for the

fans. And I think our church could learn a few

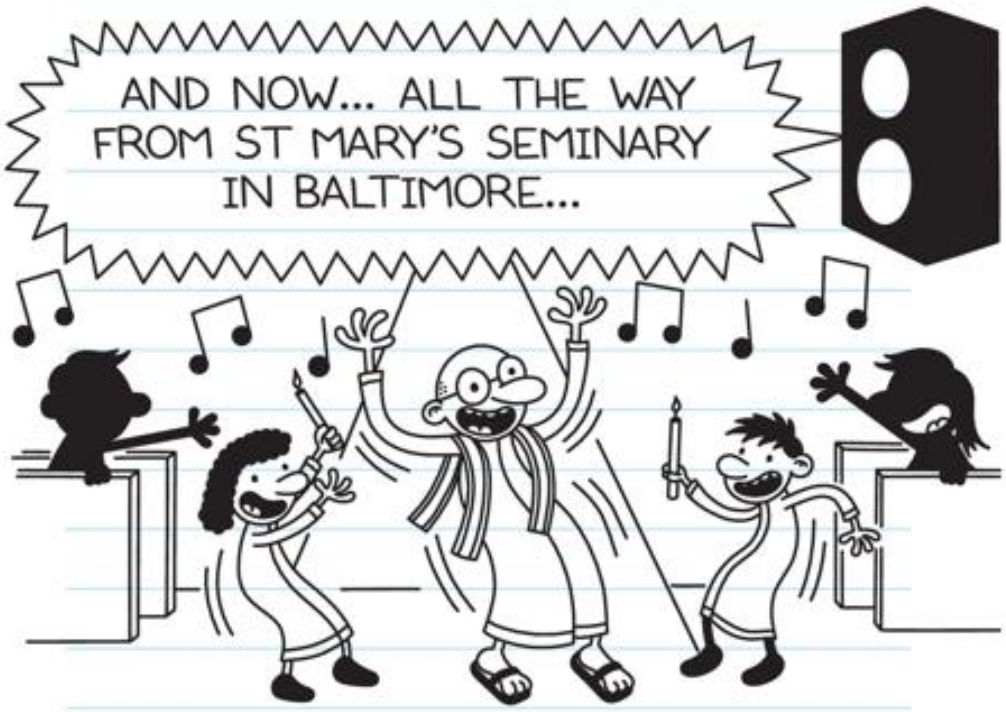
lessons from the professional sports experience.

First of all, when they introduce the priest and

altar servers, they should dim the lights and play

some loud music. Because that would get everyone

HYPED.



Another thing they could do is have a mascot to

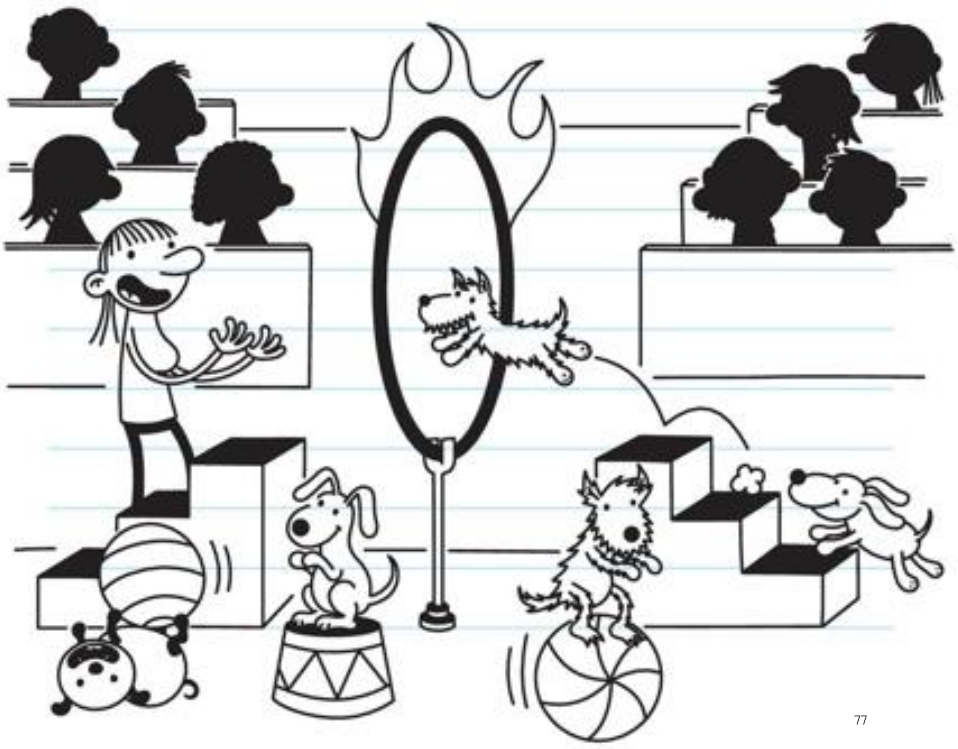
make the service more fun for little kids.

Sometimes you need to break things up to keep

people energized, so they could put in a half-time

show. And there's all SORTS of crazy stuff you

could do for entertainment.

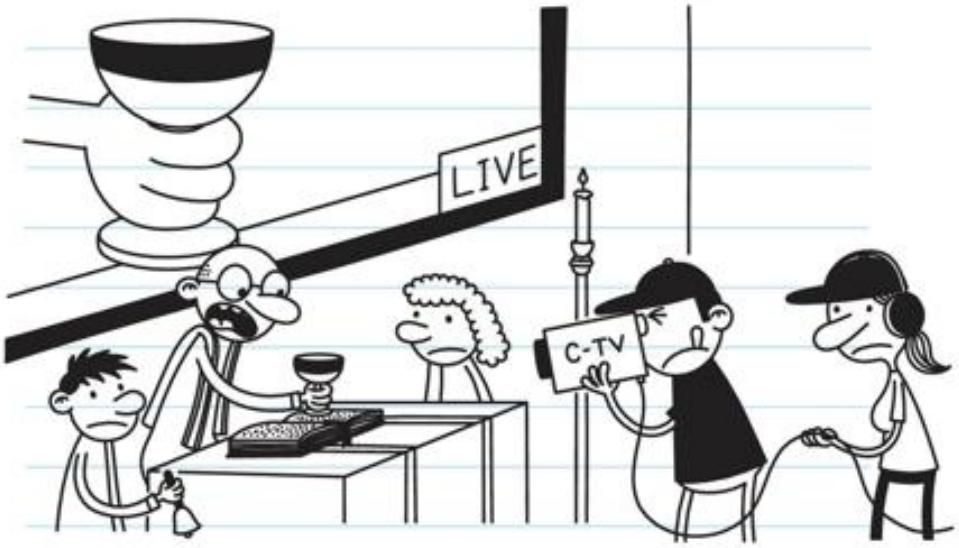


But the biggest upgrade to the church experience

would be if they added a JUMBOTRON. For

starters, it would help the people at the back feel

like they were closer to the action.



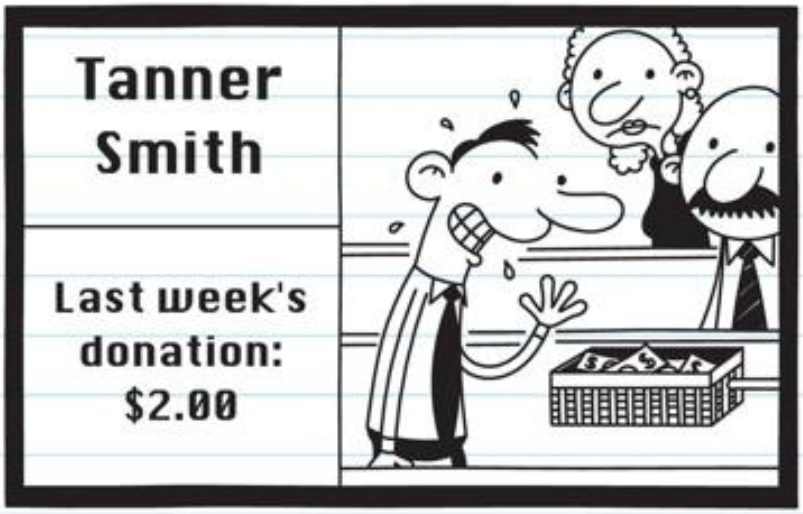
They could even have a random draw to let the

people who came in late get a seat at the FRONT.

Plus, they could use the Jumbotron to encourage

people to be a little more generous when they pass

the donation basket around.

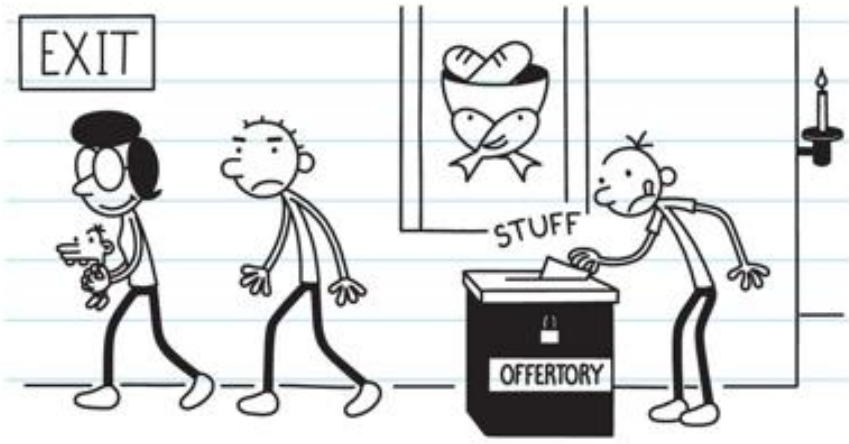


I've got a bunch of OTHER suggestions, and I

actually took the time to write them down. But I

guess the people who run our church must be pretty

busy, because so far nobody's got back to me.



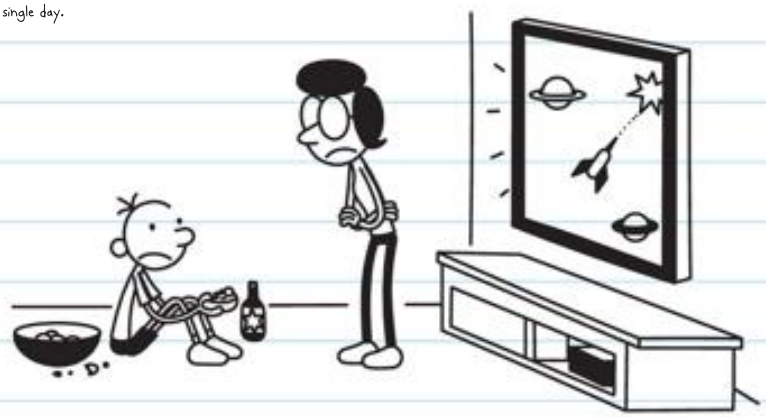
OCTOBER

Tuesday

I was really hoping Mom would just forget about

making me join a team, but she's been pressuring

me every single day.



I tried to tell her that in twenty years regular

sports will be replaced by e-sports, and athletes

won't even have to leave their couches to compete.

But I guess she's too old to get excited about

what things are gonna be like in the future.

One of the reasons I haven't decided on what

sport to play is because I'm not really that

GOOD at anything.

I've been racking my brain trying to remember a

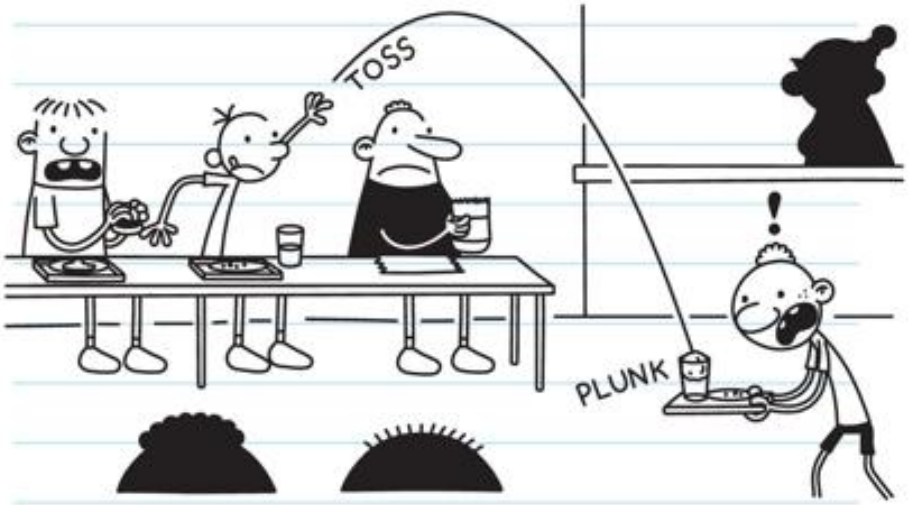
time when I did something athletic to help figure

out which sport is right for me.

And all I can think of was the time at lunch

when I landed a balled-up napkin in Justin

White's empty milk glass.



When I made that shot, the whole cafeteria went

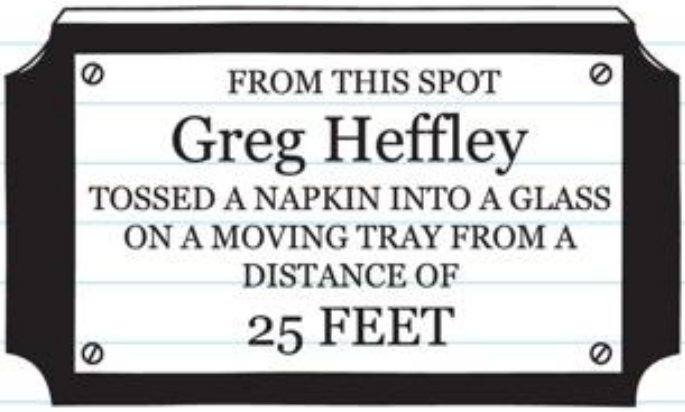
NUTS. And I'm pretty sure it's the biggest

athletic achievement of my life.

Some people were even saying they should put a

plaque in the spot where I threw the napkin so

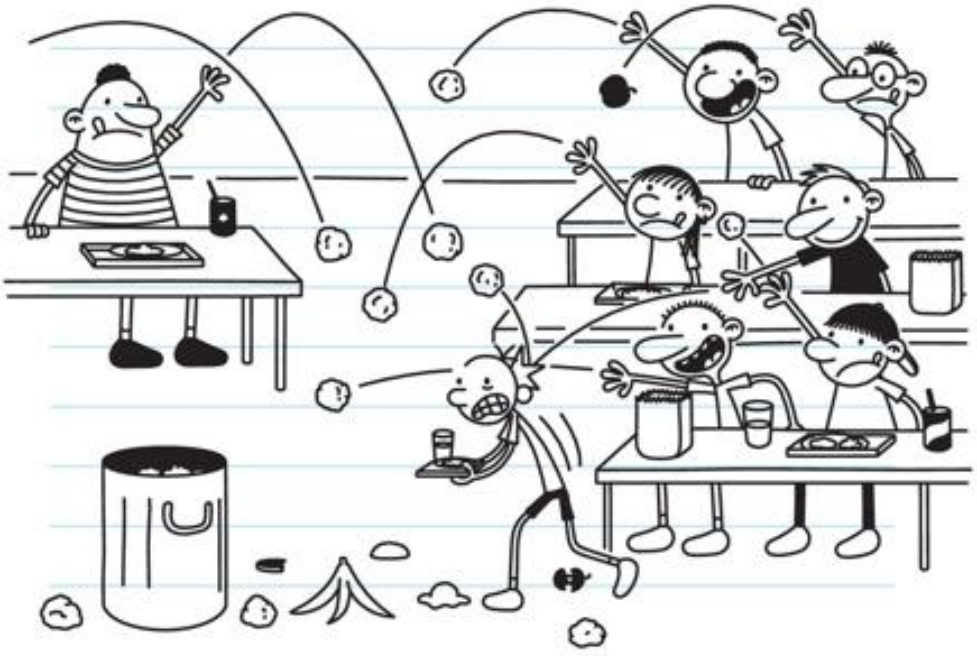
future students would know about it.



For the rest of the year, kids tried to re-create

my shot. And that turned lunch breaks into a

NIGHTMARE.



I thought my napkin shot proved I had some

TALENT and I told Mom maybe I could try out

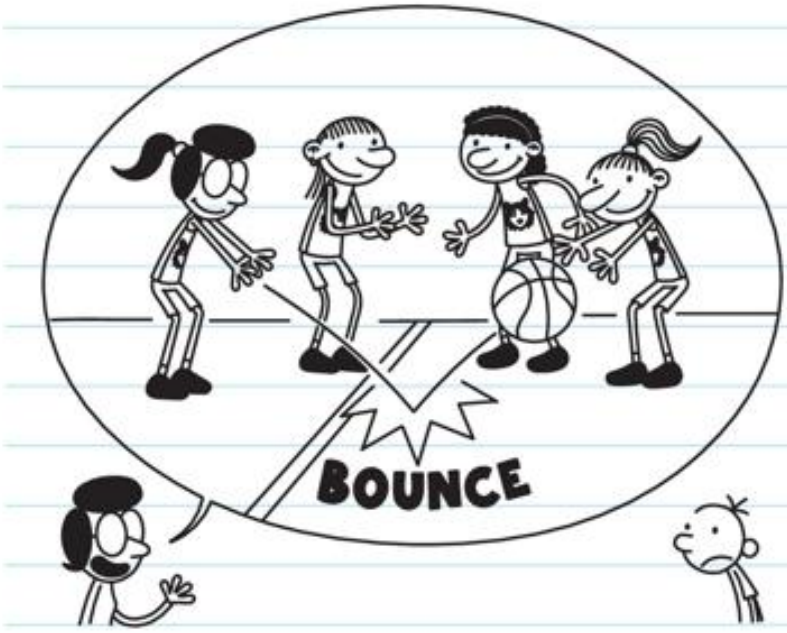
for the basketball team.

Well, that got her all excited, because she said

she played basketball when she was my age, and

her team was really GOOD. Then she said maybe

basketball skills run in our family.



Mom said her team made it all the way to the

state finals one year. But when I asked her what

happened in the championship game she said it

wasn't important.

Mom said what mattered was that I'd be part

of a TEAM. Then she went to her computer to

figure out how to sign me up to play.

I was glad Mom was excited that I decided on a

sport, but there was actually ANOTHER reason

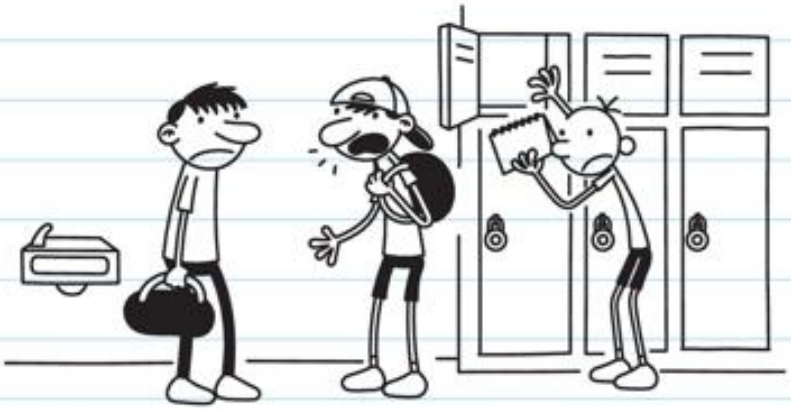
I picked basketball.

I heard some kids talking about tryouts at school

today, and there are only two teams for my whole

grade, with ten players on each one. And if you

don't make a team you get CUT.



I'm sure there will be a lot of kids trying out next

week, so I don't stand a CHANCE of making it.

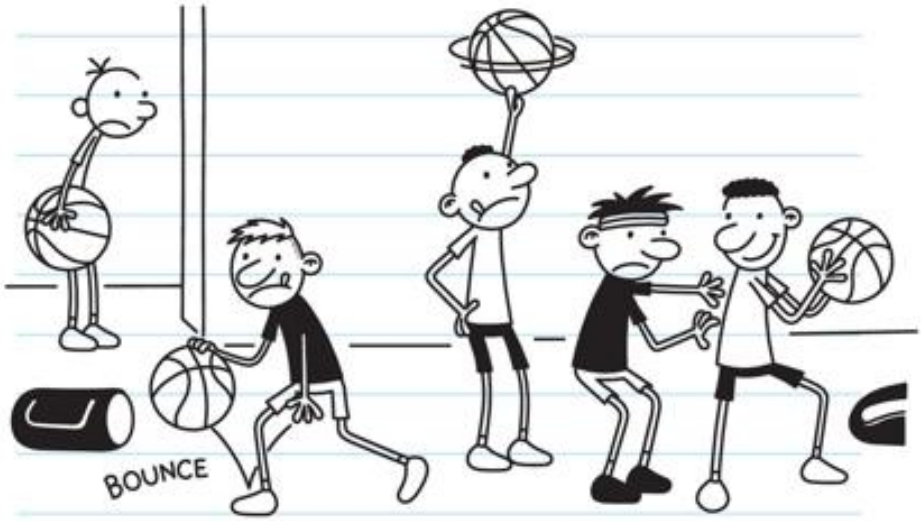
And once it's over I can finally get Mom off my

back with this sports stuff.

Sunday

When I got to the gym for basketball tryouts tonight, I counted twenty-eight kids. That meant twenty kids would make one of the two teams, and everyone else would get cut. So I liked my odds.

Plus, most of the kids looked WAY better than me. A lot of these guys have been playing since kindergarten, and they could dribble between their legs and do other crazy stuff with the ball.



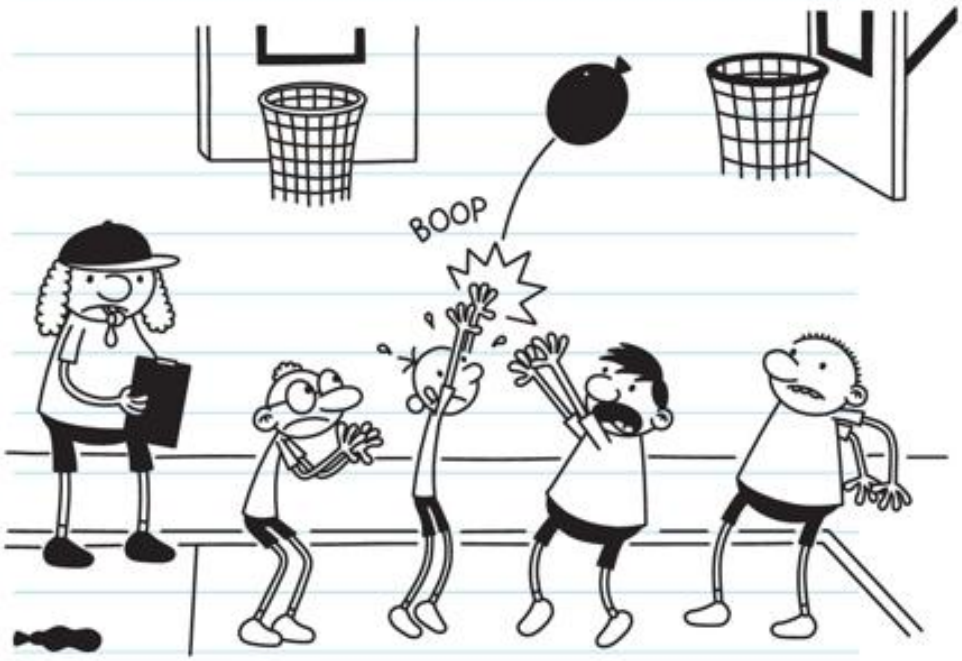
The only real experience I've had with basketball was when we did a basketball unit in Phys Ed last year. And that only lasted two days.

On top of that, the school's only basketball was

deflated, and the Phys Ed teacher couldn't find

the needle that went with the pump. So we had to

use balloons instead.



There were a handful of kids at tryouts tonight

who didn't look like they were that good, which

made me a little nervous.

I was worried I could end up making one of the

teams by accident, and then I'd have to play a

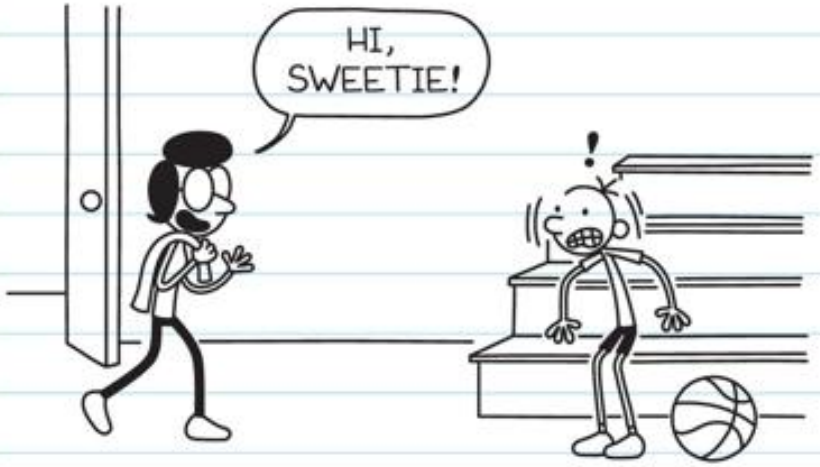
whole season. So I thought about actually doing

badly on PURPOSE, just in case.

But my plan went out of the window when Mom

came to watch tryouts. Because now I knew I'd

have to give it my best effort.



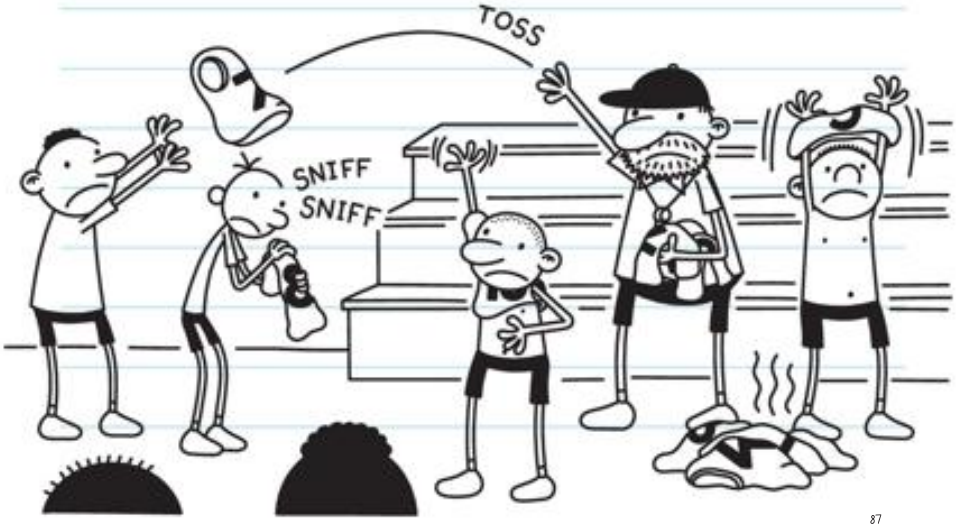
Tryouts started at 7:00 p.m., and they handed

each kid a practice jersey with a big number on

the front and back. And, from the way those

things smelled, I'm guessing they've never been

WASHED.



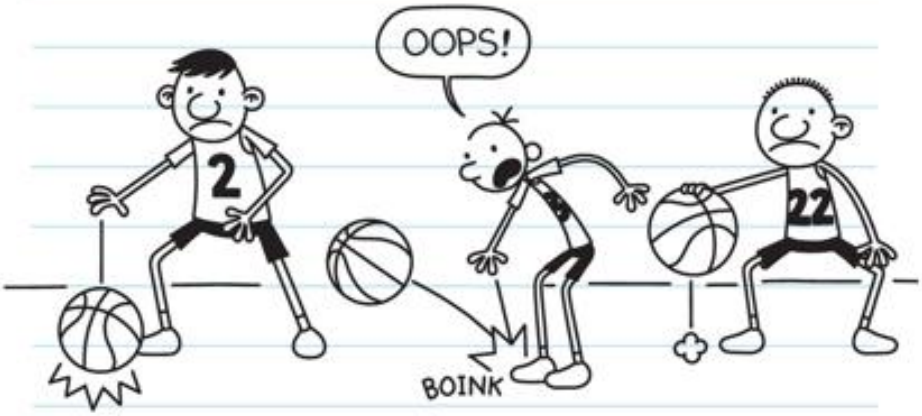
They split us up into four groups to do drills in

different areas of the gym, and my group started

off with dribbling. I was having a little trouble

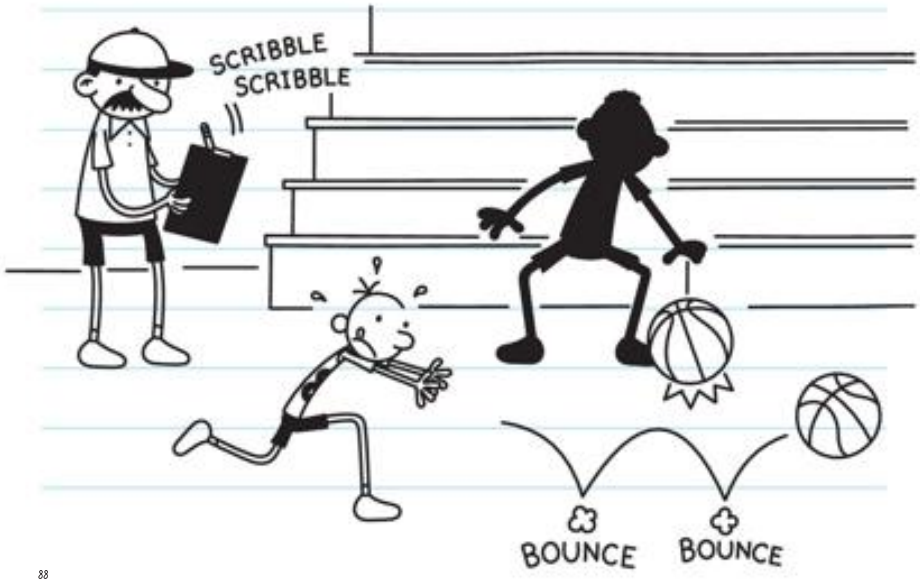
with the hand-eye coordination thing, so I kept

dribbling it off my shoe.



I noticed that every time I messed up, some guy

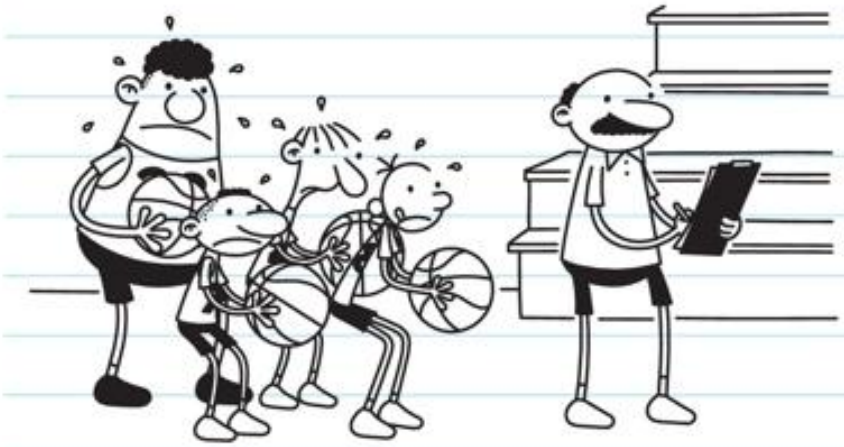
with a clipboard would write down my number.



So I tried to stay behind the guys with the

clipboards, and the other kids who stunk started

copying me.



Every once in a while I'd dribble five or six times in

a row, and of course no one was watching THEN.

But Mom made sure to let the guys with the

clipboards know when I was doing well.

After we dribbled with our right hands for a few

minutes, the guy in charge of our group said it was

time to switch to our LEFT hands. I thought he

was joking, and I actually LAUGHED.

But I probably shouldn't have, because that just

made him write down my number.

I guess some people can do things with both

hands, but not me. In fact, my left hand is

practically USELESS.

One time I sprained my right wrist and I had

to take a test at school using my left hand. And

I think I would've done better if I'd held the

pencil in my MOUTH.

7. Who developed the theory of gravity?

ISAAC NEWTON

Once we finished with our dribbling drills, we switched to free throws. And I really wished I hadn't learned to shoot a basketball with a BALLOON, because I totally misjudged how much effort I needed to put into my shot.

I think Mom could see I wasn't doing so great,

so, whenever one of the evaluators got near

her, she'd snitch on the OTHER kids who were

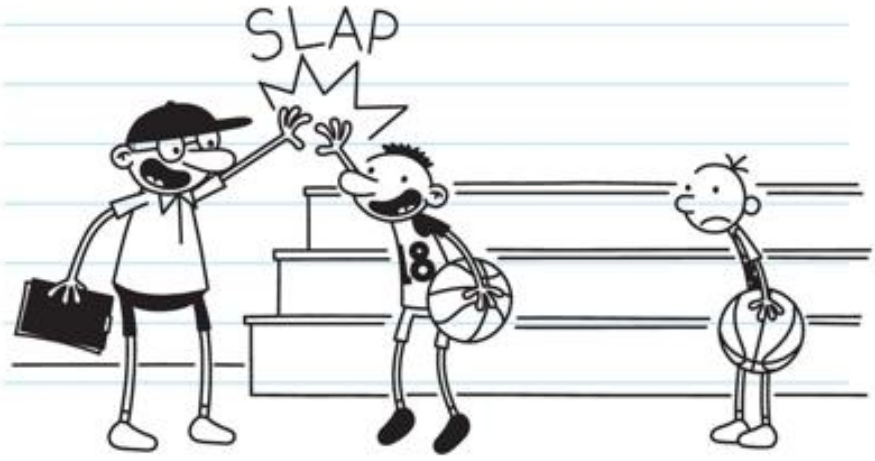
struggling.

But it's not like Mom was the ONLY parent

helping their own kid. Some of the evaluators had

kids who were trying out tonight, so I wonder

how fair the scoring really was.



By the end of the night, it was pretty obvious

who was gonna make a team and who wasn't. But

I guess they needed to decide which kid was gonna

get the final spot, because they made the bottom

nine kids fight it out in a practice play. And all I

can say is it wasn't PRETTY.

Once that was over, they collected our jerseys.

The guy running tryouts told everyone that if

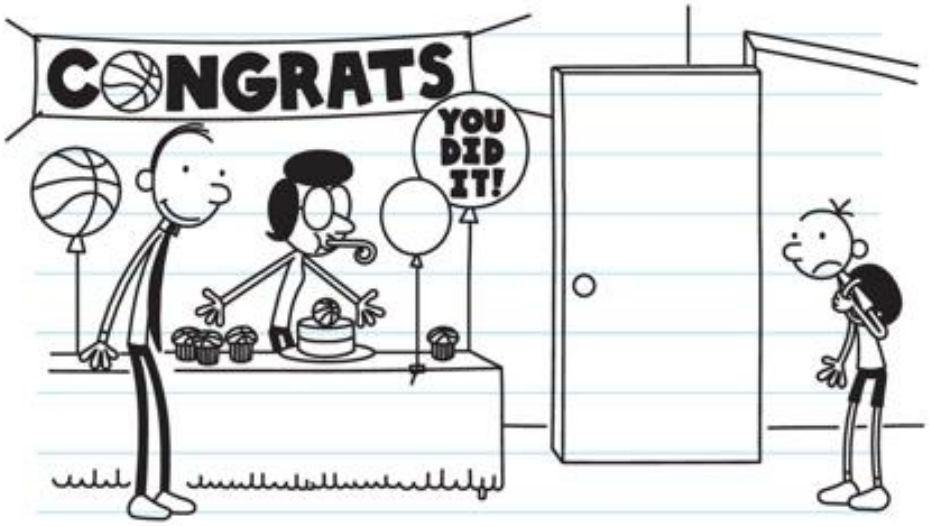
we made a team our parents would get an email by

tomorrow night. But after that experience I'm

not exactly holding my BREATH.

Tuesday

When I got home from school yesterday, my plan was to relax and maybe take a nap. So I was pretty surprised when I walked into the kitchen.



I was confused, because I knew for SURE I didn't make either of the basketball teams. But Mom said she heard from one of the coaches who said I DID. Then she showed me the email to prove it.

It was from Mr Patel, Preet Patel's father. Preet's one of the best athletes in our grade, and during the student–teacher basketball game last year Preet totally DOMINATED.

I couldn't understand how I got on the same

team as a kid like THAT. But Mom said the

evaluators must've seen something special in me,

and that's why I made the cut.

When I thought back to the night before, I

couldn't remember Preet actually being at tryouts.

So now I was even MORE confused.

At school today Jabari Bruce told me what

happened. Preet missed tryouts because he had to

go to his uncle's funeral, and the rule was that if

you skipped tryouts you couldn't be on a team.

So Mr Patel made a NEW team with Preet plus

all the kids who got cut, just so his son could play

this season.

Well, I wasn't happy to hear THAT I thought

I was off the hook for basketball, and now all

of a sudden I was on an actual team. And I

knew there was no way Mom was letting me out of

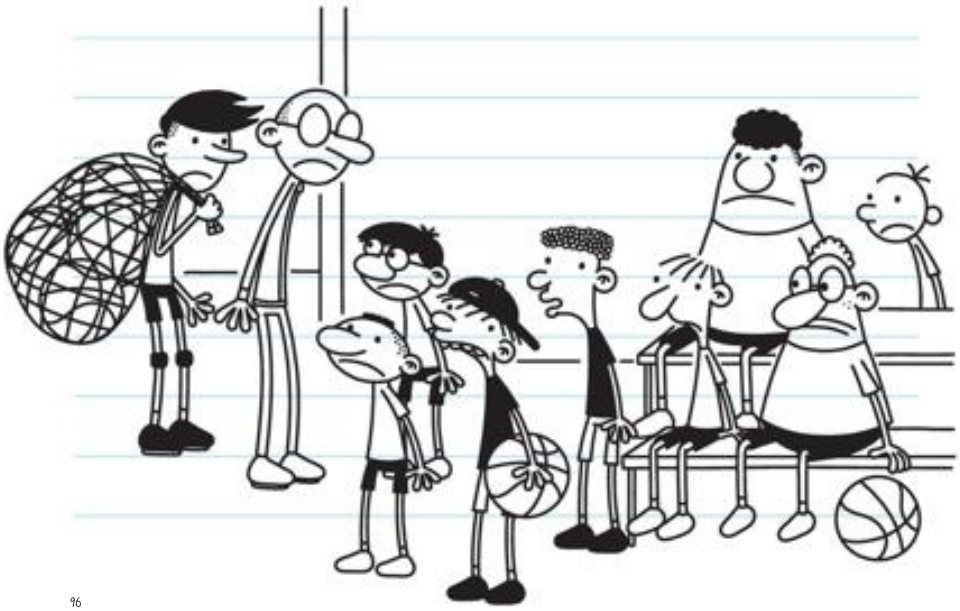
this, either.

Our first practice was tonight at the elementary

school. And when Mr Patel saw our team assembled

for the first time I'll bet he had second thoughts

about taking this on.

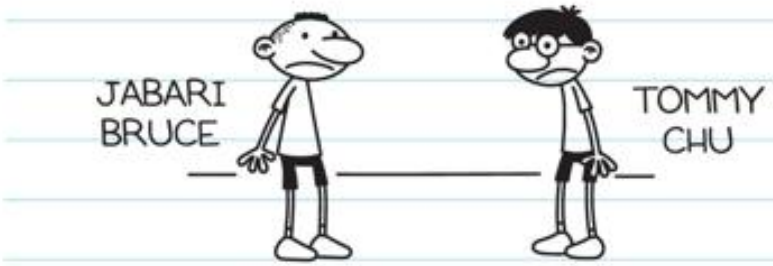


My teammates were the kids who were in that last

practice play at tryouts, and I already knew a few

of them from school. Jabari Bruce and Tommy Chu

were part of that trade deal with me on Sports Day.



Then there were Darren and Marcus Woodley, who

might actually be decent athletes if they weren't

always trying to KILL each other.

We also had Edward Mealy, who hasn't said a

word since second grade, and Kevin Pomodoro,

who nobody can understand when he's wearing his

retainer.

I guess it's always good to have a little height on

your basketball team, so we're lucky to have Yusef

Meskin. But Yusef likes to scoop up kids who are

my size and put them in "The Cave".

It's also good to have a little TOUGHNESS,

and that's where Ruby Bird comes in. And

the reason she's on a boys' team is because she

attacked one of the evaluators at the GIRLS'

tryouts for writing her number down.

Anyway, I wouldn't have blamed Preet or his dad

for walking out as soon as they got a good look at

us. But Mr Patel gathered the team round him so

he could give a SPEECH.

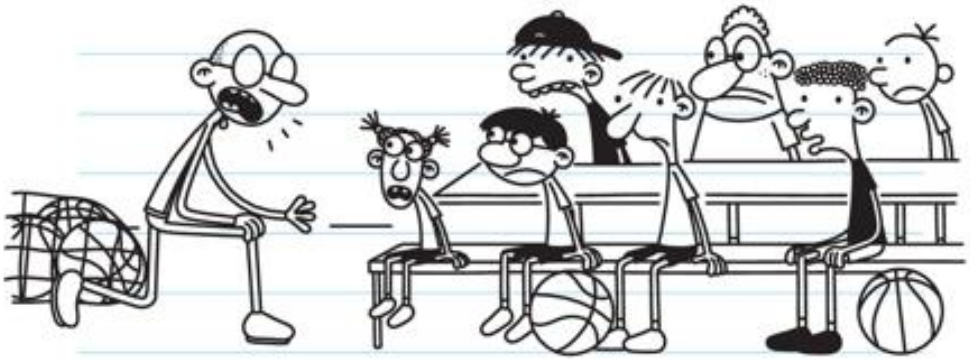
Mr Patel said that we might not have the most

talented team, but we were going to out-work

everyone else in the league. And he said we were

gonna learn to play the RIGHT way, starting

tonight.



I figured that, if this was the guy who taught

Preet how to play, maybe he could teach the

REST of us, too.

Tommy Chu raised his hand and asked how come we

were meeting in the elementary-school hall instead

of the GYM.

Mr Patel explained that the two other teams

booked all the gym time for the season, so we were

gonna have to make do with the LEFTOVERS.

I didn't understand how we were supposed to

play basketball when we didn't have a HOOP, but

Mr Patel said that we were gonna start with the

fundamentals and work up to shooting later on.

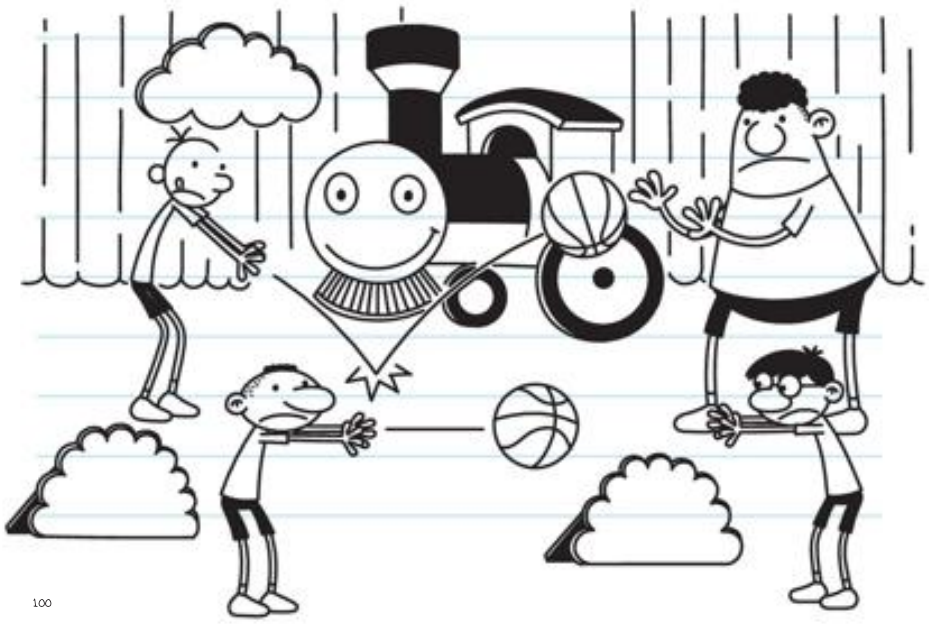
We did some dribbling drills, and then moved on

to passing. But, with all the tables set up in the

hall, there wasn't a lot of room to move around. So

half of us had to go on the stage, which was set

up for a kindergarten play.



Even though we were trying our hardest, Mr

Patel was getting frustrated we weren't picking

things up more quickly. And every time one of us

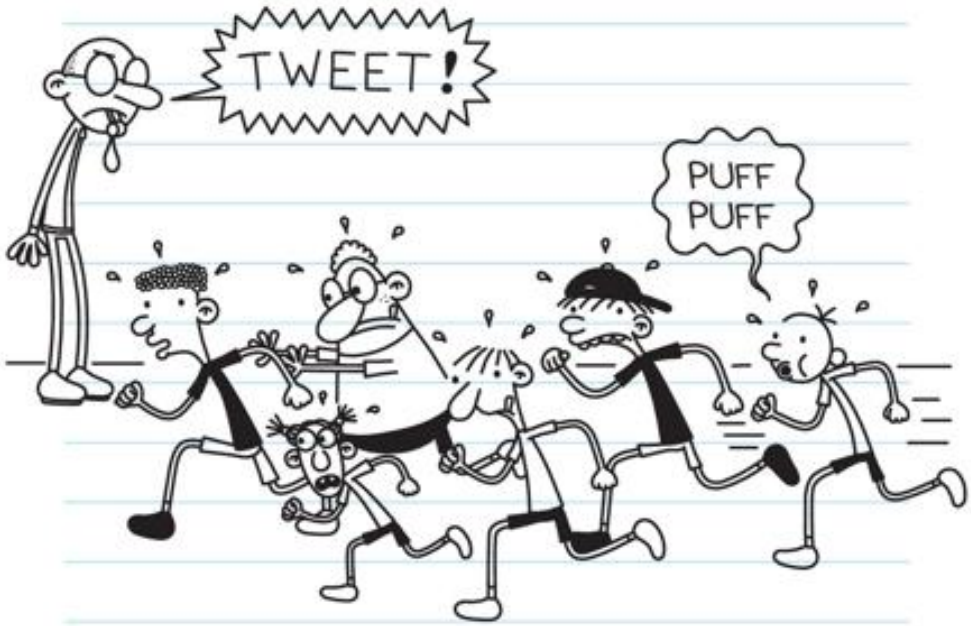
made a mistake he'd make us run sprints to the

other side of the hall.

But that just made us tired, so we made even

MORE mistakes. And after a while everyone

except Preet was running sprints.



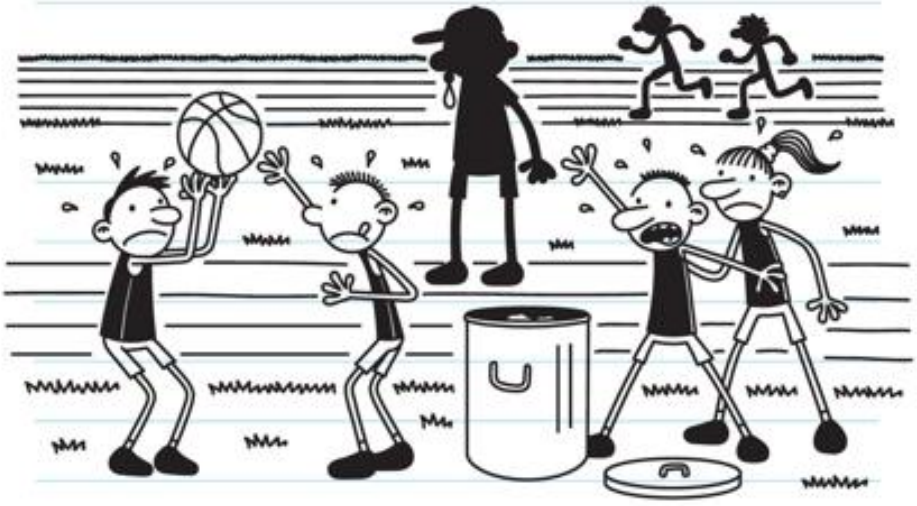
Personally, I don't think coaches should use

running as a punishment, because all it does is make

kids hate to run.

And I doubt the track coach forces his team to

play BASKETBALL whenever they're slacking.



The thing I hate the most about running is that

it makes you SWEAT. My theory about sweat

is that it's your body's way of telling you you're

working too hard, and you need to take it easy.

But when I shared my thoughts with Mr Patel he

just made me run more sprints.

When I got into the car after practice, Mom wanted

to hear all about it. I told her how our team was

basically just Preet and a bunch of B-Team players,

so we weren't gonna be any good this season.

But Mom said I'd probably get a lot of playing time

on this team, which got me WORRIED. Every kid

dreams about hitting the big shot to win the game

for their team, but there's a FLIP side. And that's

being the person who blows it.

There's a guy in my town named Anthony Grow,

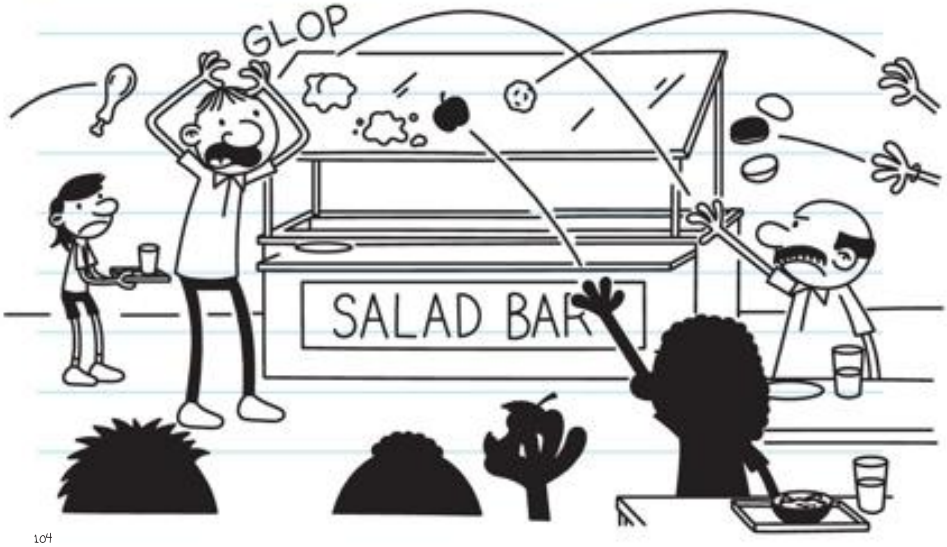
and twenty years ago he missed a kick at an

empty net and lost a game against Slacksville,

who's our town's biggest rival.

And now he can't go anywhere without people

reminding him about it.



If I was Anthony, I'd just move to Slacksville,

because over there he's a HERO.

I made the mistake of telling Mom how I was

worried about messing up like Anthony Grow,

and she told me a story that made me feel even

MORE nervous about things.

Mom had been the backup point guard on her

middle-school basketball team, and in the

championship game the regular point guard got

HURT. So, with the score tied in the fourth

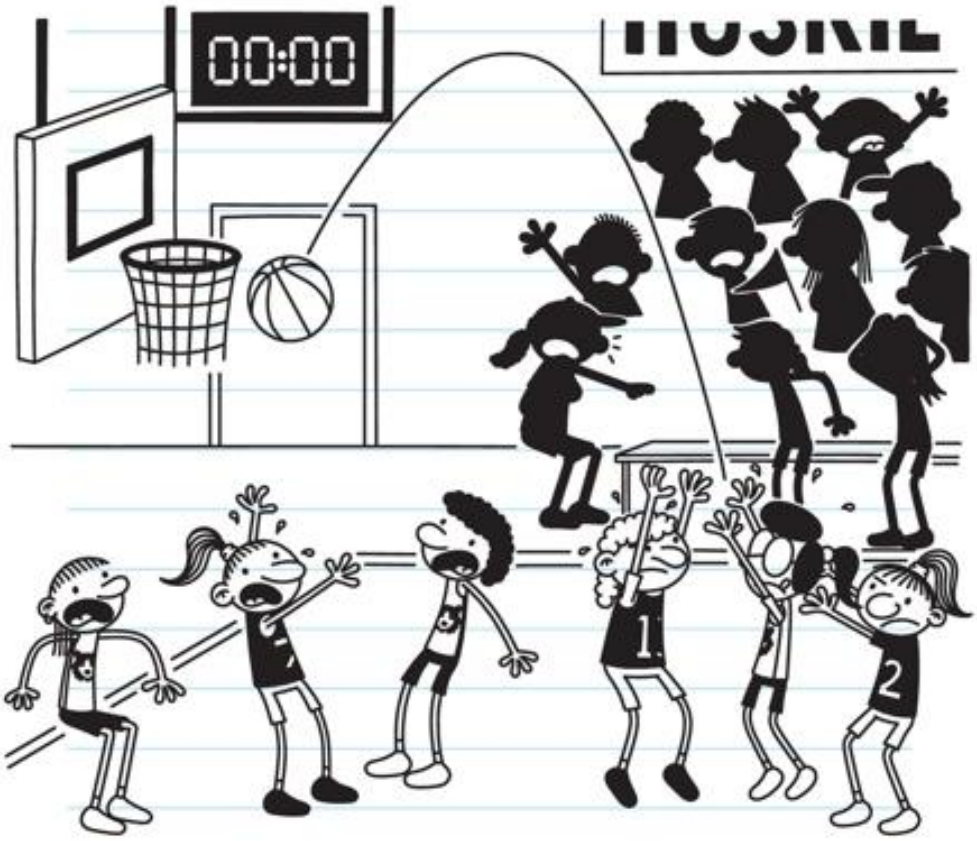
quarter, Mom had to go in and take her place.

Mom said she actually did pretty well, but with

the clock winding down she got flanked. So she

had to heave the ball up as the buzzer went, and

her shot came up short.



Mom says she's GLAD it happened because it

taught her to deal with failure and made her a

better person. But I'd be willing to bet Mom's

teammates just wished she hadn't CHOKED.

Thursday

I should've done a little more research before I decided on basketball as my sport, because the schedule is BRUTAL.

We've got practice three days a week plus one game on Saturday and another on Sunday. And, on top of all that, I'm supposed to keep up with my homework and get enough sleep to make it through school the next day.

It's hard ENOUGH getting sleep with all the racket outside my window every night. And that's because we put up a basketball hoop in our driveway.

When I made the basketball team, Mom went out

and bought a backboard and hoop for above the

garage. I guess she was hoping I could throw

extra shots on the nights I didn't have practice.

But I haven't taken a single shot on that thing,

because, the second it went up, the teenagers in

our neighbourhood swooped in.

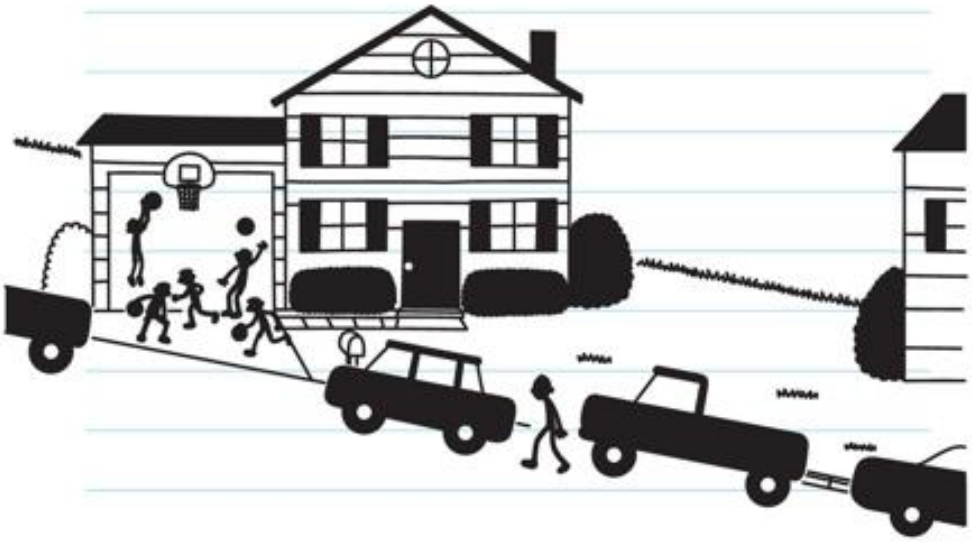
Ever since they took down the outdoor hoops

at our school, there haven't been a lot of places

where kids can play. So now they come to our

house, and Dad has to park down the street

when he gets home from work.



Dad told Mom he wanted to take the hoop down,

but Mom said she was happy that kids were

outdoors having fun.

I guess I wouldn't have minded too much, either,

but the teenagers don't know when to STOP.

And when we're heading to bed for the night

those guys are still out there going hard.

Lately, Mom's been trying to give them a hint

that it's time to go home by flicking the lights

above the garage on and off. But I guess

teenagers aren't real good at taking hints,

because they just keep right on playing.

So a few nights ago Mom turned the lights off

when it got dark outside. But those guys were

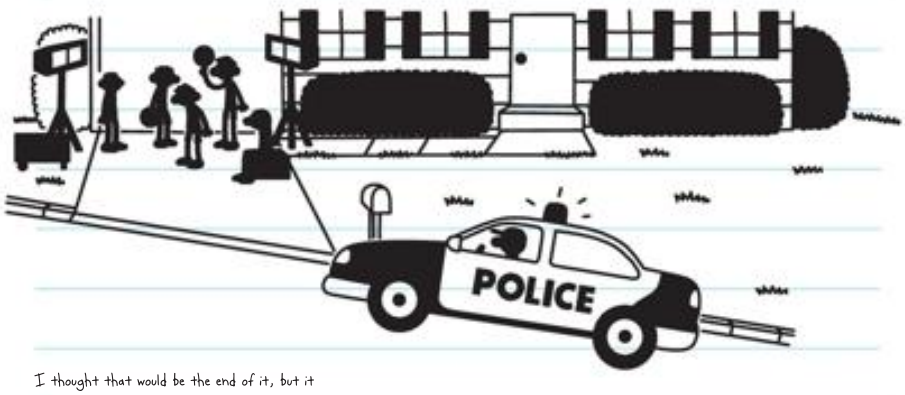
PREPARED and they set up a generator and

lights in no time.

Last night, Dad reached his breaking point and

called the COPS, who were at the house ten

minutes later.



I thought that would be the end of it, but it

turns out cops like basketball, too.

We've kind of given up on trying to stop people

from using the hoop. But I guarantee you that the

first time there's nobody out there we're taking

that thing down.

Another reason I've been so tired lately is because

our practices have been starting at 9:30 p.m. We've

been using the elementary-school hall, but we have

to wait until the other two teams are done with

THEIR practices before we can start ours.

On our first night at the hall, Mr Patel forgot

his bag of basketballs and had to go home to get

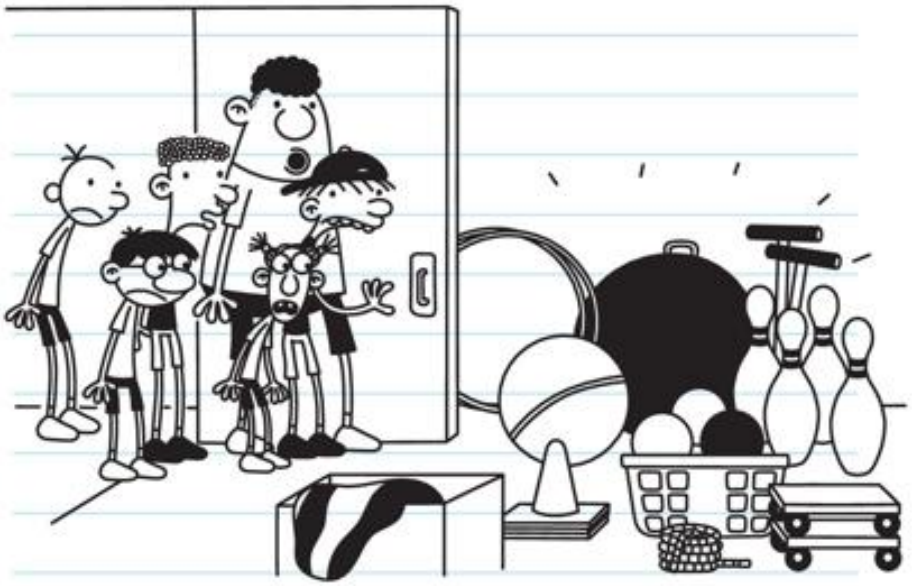
it. And while he was gone Darren Woodley noticed

the Phys Ed storeroom was open, so we went

inside. There was all SORTS of fun equipment in

there, like pogo sticks and hula hoops and even a

giant parachute.



It had been a long time since any of us had

played with that stuff, and all of a sudden we

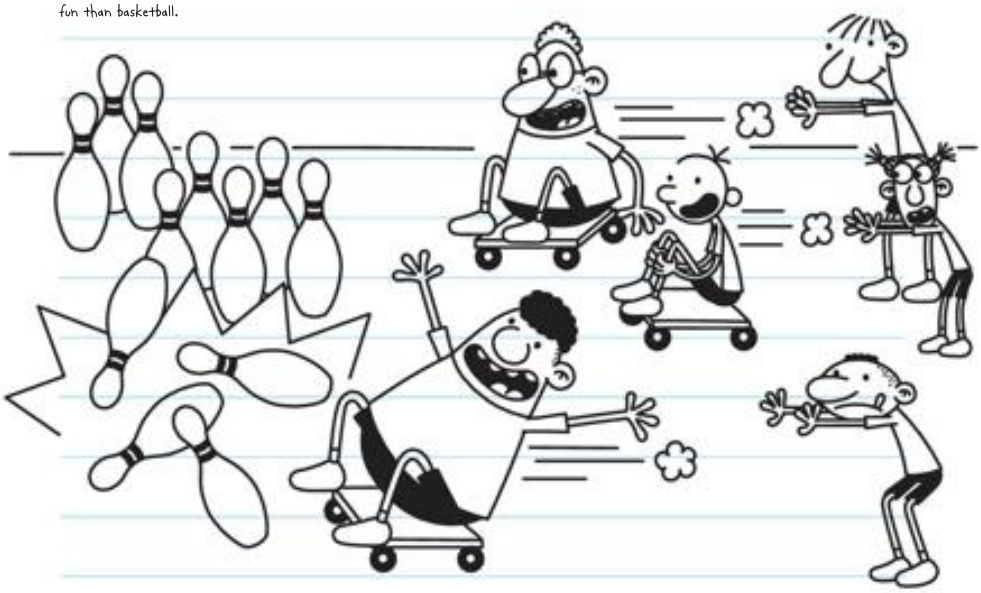
were like little kids again.

We even made up a whole new game that used

those square four-wheeled scooters and some giant

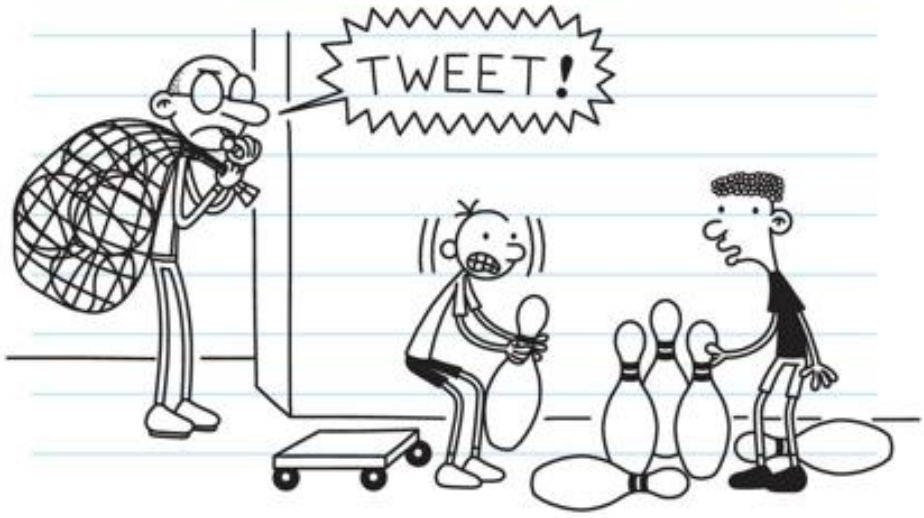
plastic bowling pins. And it was actually WAY more

fun than basketball.



But when Mr Patel came back with the bag of

balls he shut our game down.



Mr Patel told us we were there to play basketball,

not to goof around. Then he made us put

everything back in the room where we found it.

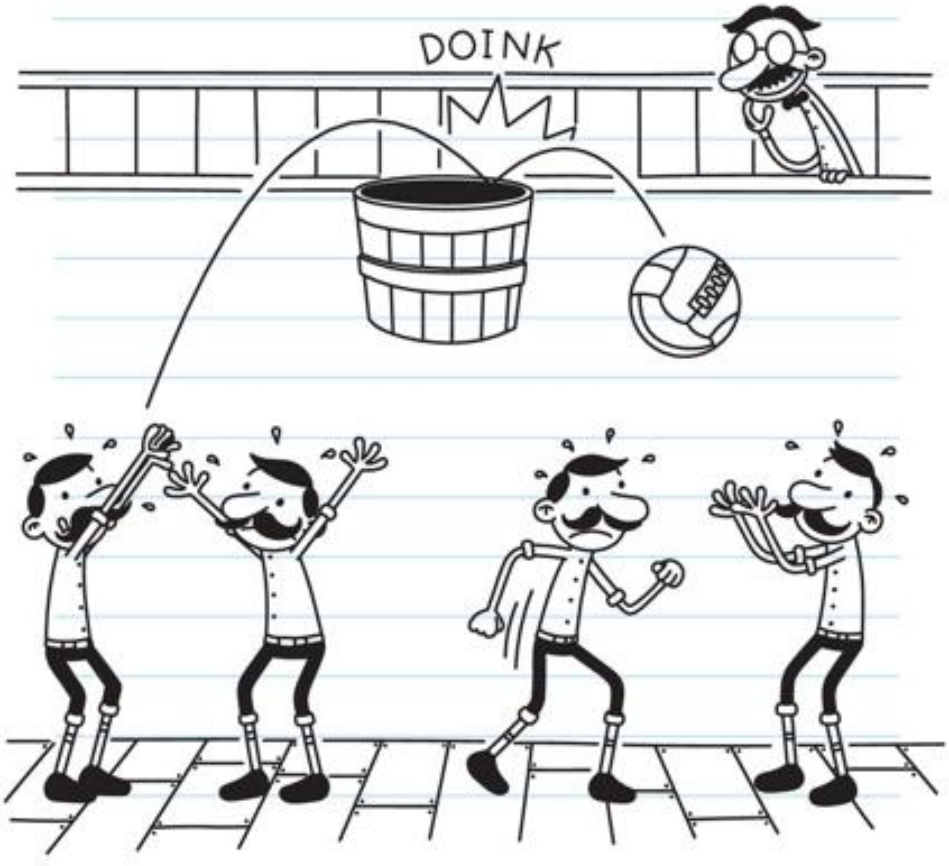
I've read that basketball started off with a bunch

of guys horsing around with a leather soccer ball

and a peach basket, and now it's popular all over

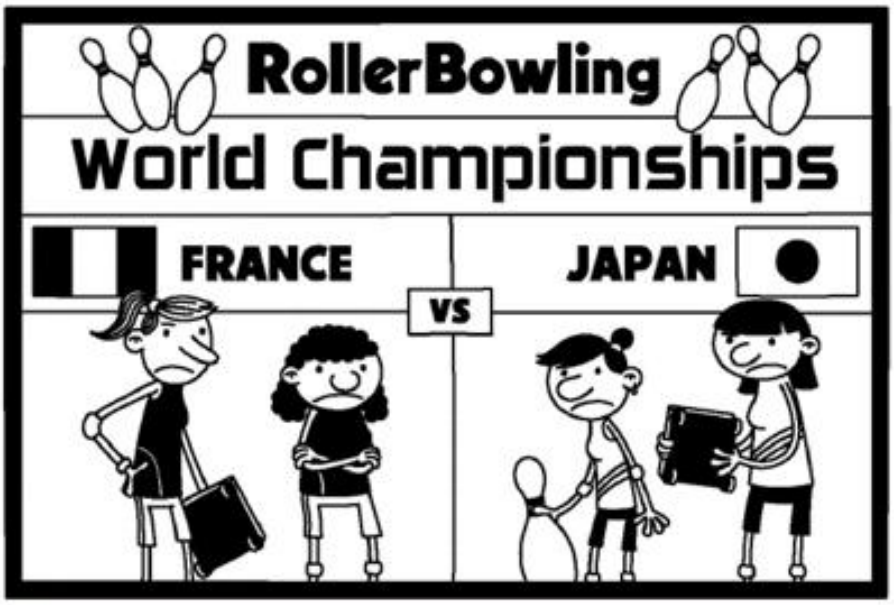
the WORLD. But if their coach had been anything

like Mr Patel it probably never would've happened.



And I'll bet Mr Patel's gonna feel pretty dumb

when the sport we invented goes PRO.



Once we finished putting all the equipment back

in the storeroom, Mr Patel lined us up at the foul

line to practise free throws. And, even after he

showed us the right way to shoot, most of us

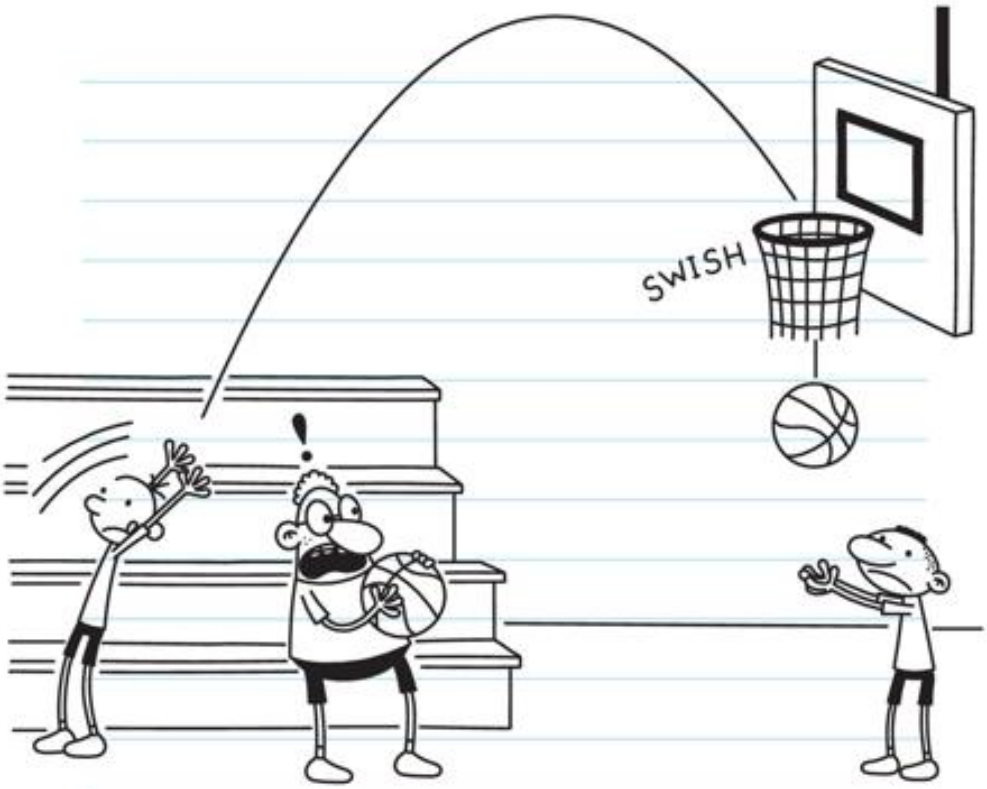
couldn't get the hang of it.

After missing a bunch of times in a row, I was

getting pretty frustrated. So I shot the ball

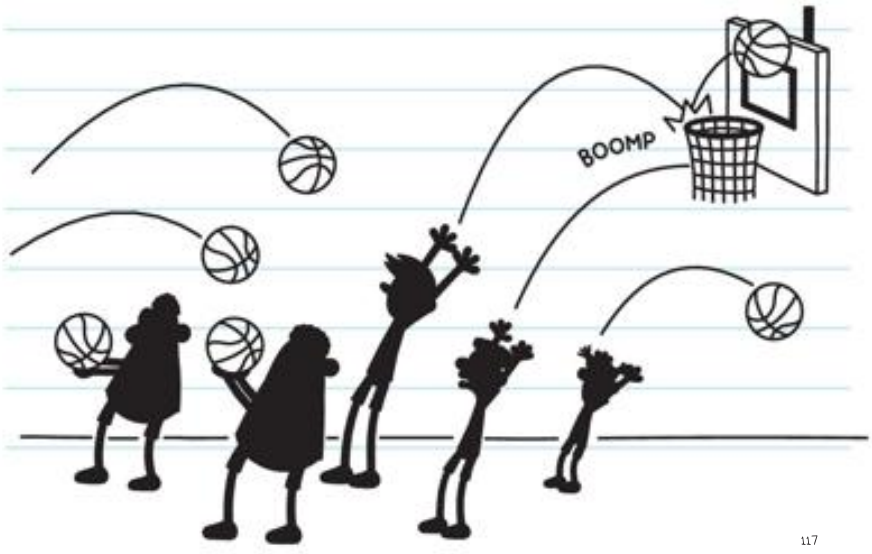
BACKWARDS, just for kicks. And, believe it or

not, it went IN.

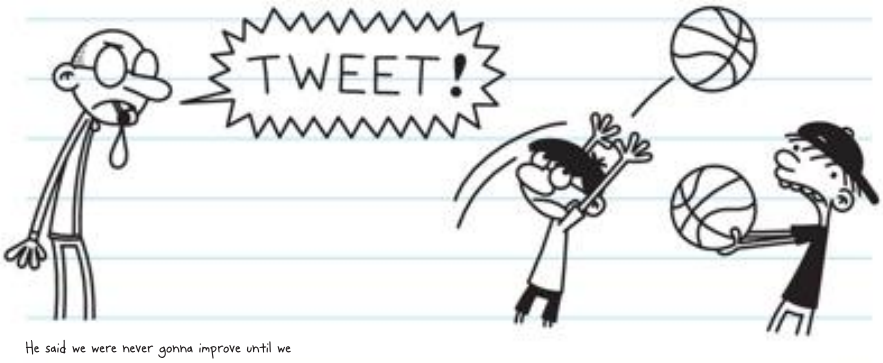


My teammates were pretty impressed, and after

that EVERYONE tried making a backwards shot.

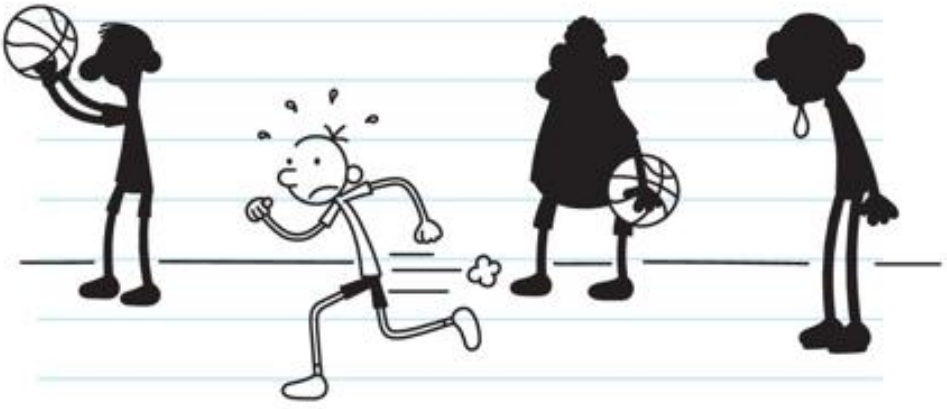


But Mr Patel shut THAT down, too.



He said we were never gonna improve until we started taking things more SERIOUSLY. I tried to explain that I was better at shooting backwards than forward, and maybe the way he was teaching us was all wrong.

But I guess Mr Patel thought I was being a smart alec, so he made me run sprints until the end of practice.



On the first few nights we just worked on stuff

like dribbling, passing and shooting. But at the

beginning of last night's practice Mr Patel said we

were gonna have a practice game.

Everybody was pretty excited that we were finally

gonna get to actually PLAY. But right when we

were about to start a group of men my dad's age

walked into the school hall.

One of the guys walked up to Mr Patel and said

we were gonna have to get off the court because

the Men's League had the hall booked at 9:30

every Wednesday night.

But Mr Patel said that we had the hall until

10:30, and he had double-checked that

afternoon.

Things started to get a little HEATED, but then

Mr Patel came up with a solution. He said we could

play those guys in a practice play, and whoever

won could have the court.

I was a little nervous about playing a group of

grown men. But these guys didn't look like they

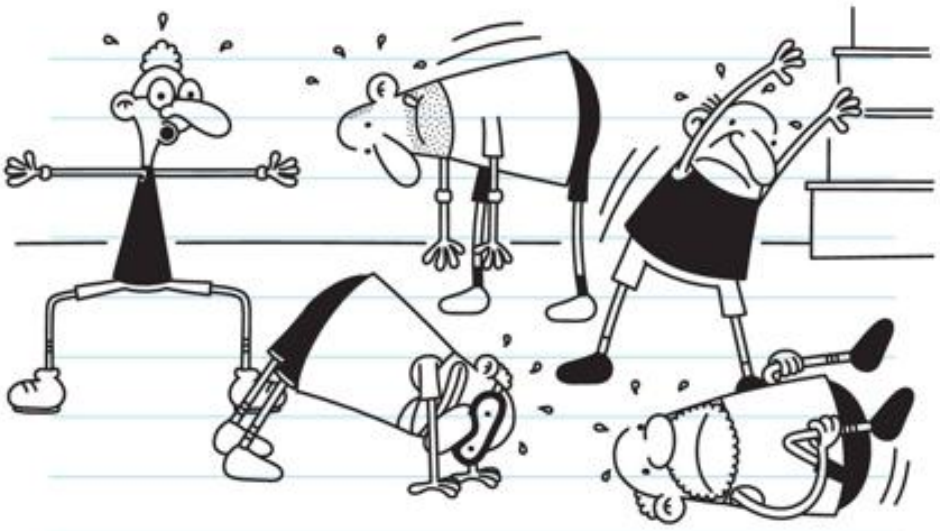
were in the best shape, and I thought we might

be able to take them.

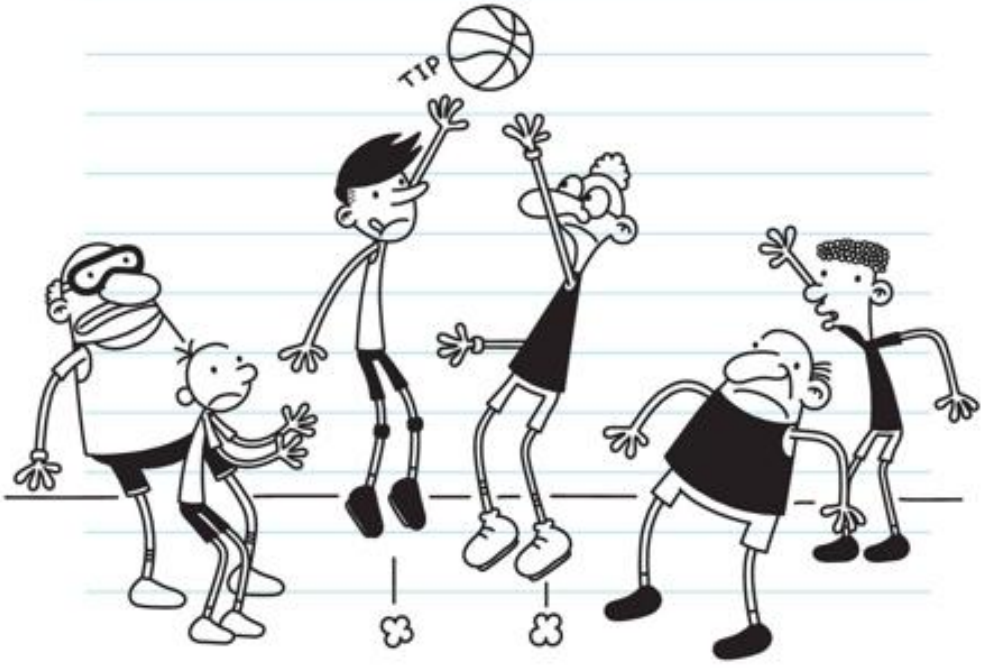
It took a long time for the Men's League to

warm up. I thought they were getting cold feet

and were just STALLING.



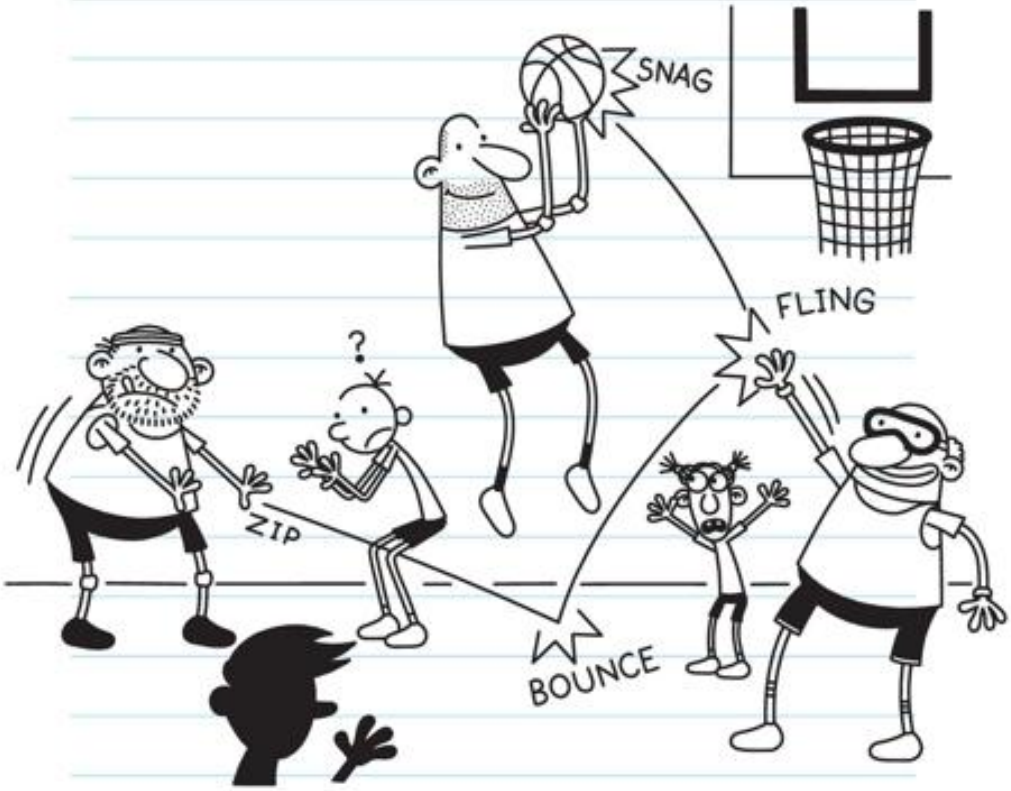
After those guys finally finished stretching, we got started. We won the tip-off, and I figured we were on our way to an easy win. But it was all downhill after that.



Those Men's League guys might not have been

super athletic, but they knew how to PLAY. And

they totally made fools out of us.



The whole time they never stopped TALKING.

And, I hate to admit it, but they were really

getting inside our HEADS.

It was all corny stuff that only grown-ups would

say, but it really worked. And the more they

talked, the more we struggled.

YOU REACH, I TEACH!
I'M BREAKIN' ANKLES OUT HERE!
STUMBLE
BOUNCE
TRIP
I'M CALLING BANK!

The person who was getting the most frustrated

was PREET. And I could tell he really wanted to

stick it to these guys.

But they had figured out that Preet was our only

good player, and whenever he'd get the ball they

were all over him.

At one point, Preet stole the ball and sprinted to

the other end of the court for what should've been

an easy lay-up. I think Preet wanted to make a

statement, because he decided to DUNK it.

We were all pretty excited to see Preet throw it

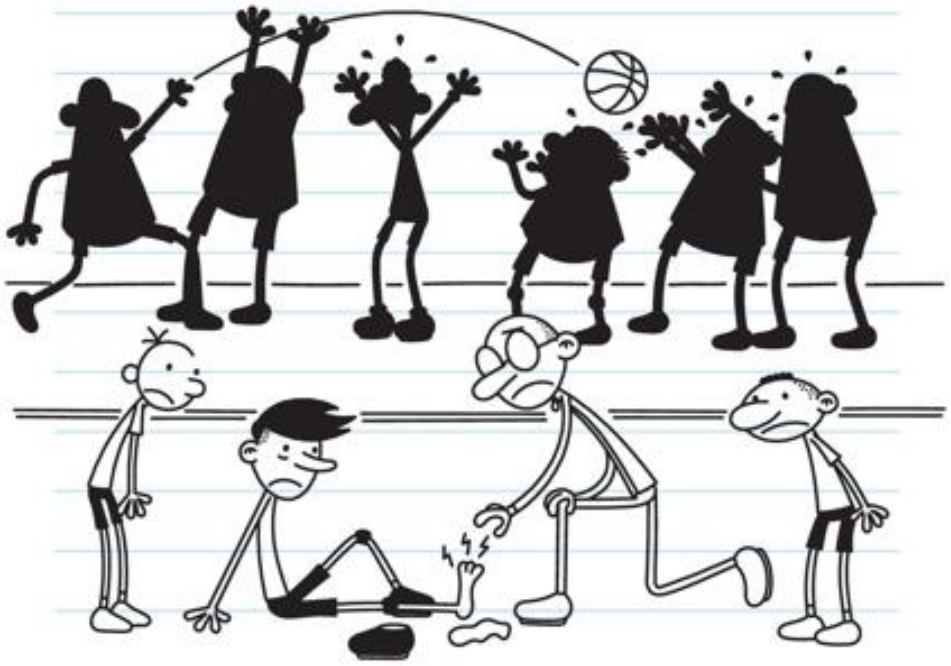
down. But I guess he needs to grow a few more

inches before he's ready for that.

Preet landed awkwardly on his ankle. And, even

though the game wasn't officially over, I think

the Men's League saw it as a WIN.

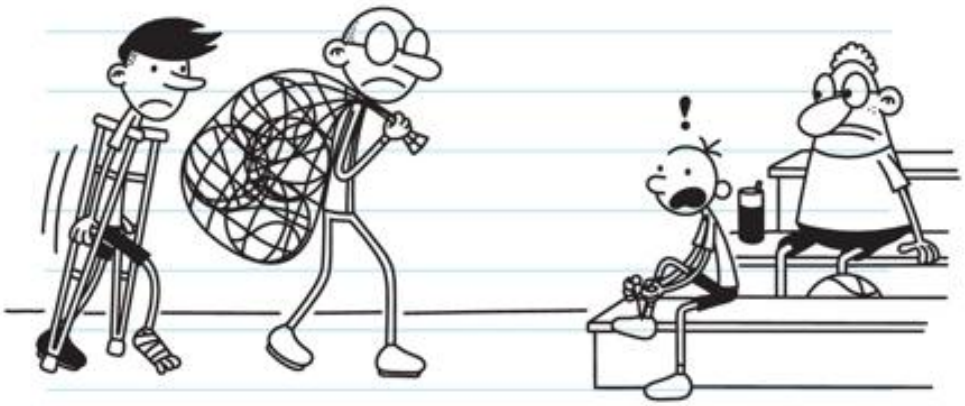


I thought Preet just twisted his ankle and he'd

be back to normal for the next practice. But when

he showed up at the school hall tonight he was on

CRUTCHES.



It turns out Preet BROKE his ankle, and he's

out for the whole season. And that's bad news for

the rest of us, because without him we're toast.

It's even worse news for Mr Patel, because now he's

stuck coaching this team for the rest of the season.

And I'm sure he'd rather be spending his free time

watching TV or learning to juggle.

But at the beginning of practice Mr Patel gave a

speech. He said injuries are a part of the game,

and the rest of us were gonna have to step up.

Then he ran us through some plays that were

supposed to make it easy to score. We started

with five on three, but nobody could make a

basket. So we went to five on two, and then five

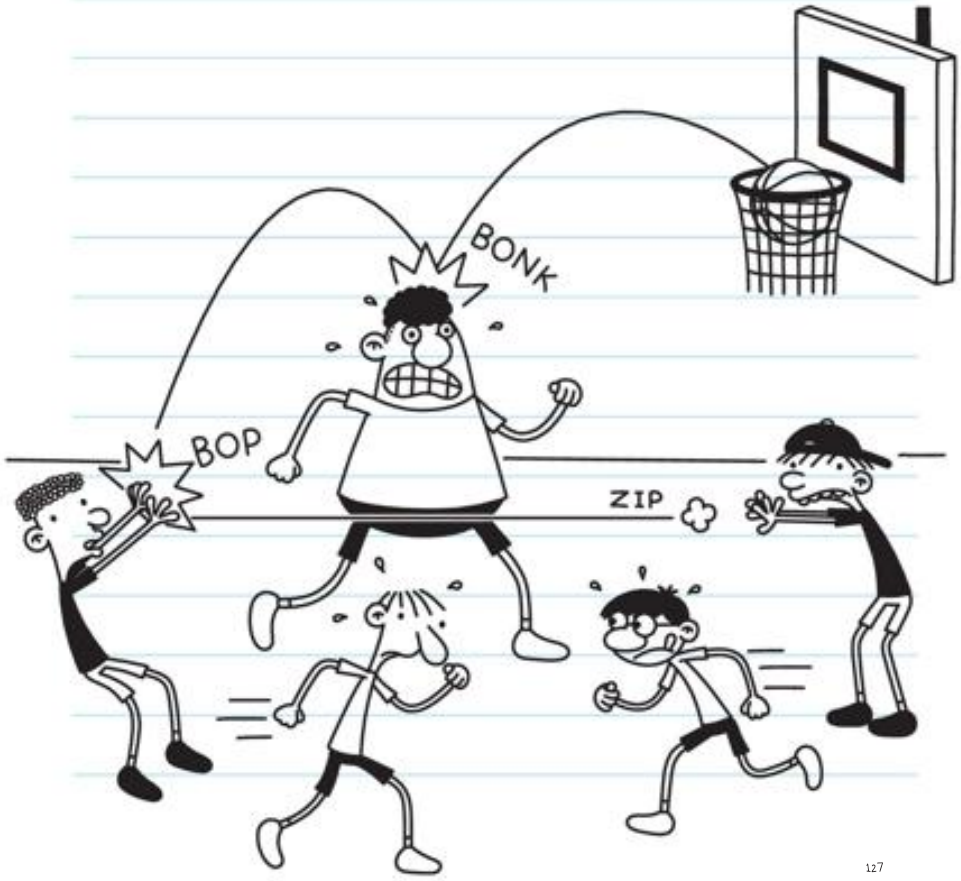
on one, and we STILL couldn't score.

We finally hit a shot when it was five on ZERO,

but the play didn't go the way Mr Patel drew it

up. So if we actually score in our first game this

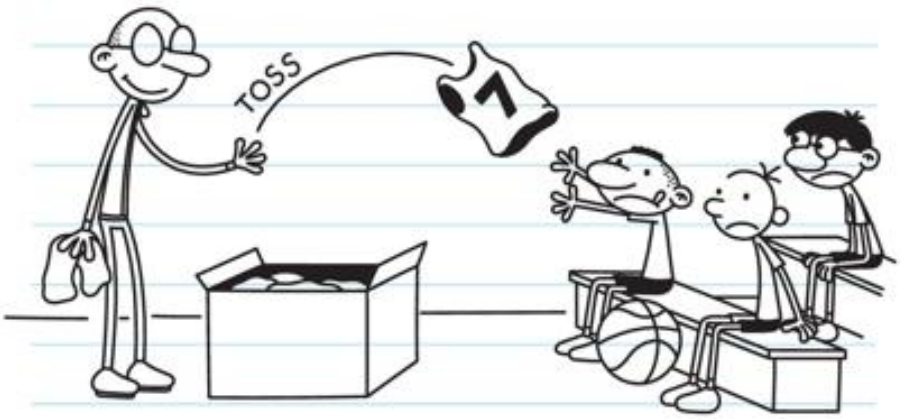
weekend it's gonna be by blind LUCK.



At the end of practice, Mr Patel said he had a

surprise for us and opened a big cardboard box.

Then he started handing out UNIFORMS.



I noticed the uniforms looked kind of familiar,

and I recognized the SMELL, too. Mr Patel

explained that there wasn't enough time to get

new uniforms for the team, so they had to recycle

the ones from tryouts.

But there was something DIFFERENT about

the jerseys, because now there was a logo

printed on the back.

Mr Patel told us that every team has a sponsor

to help pay for stuff like hall rentals, and our

sponsor for the season was Marconi's Deli Bar. I

guess it was tough finding a good sponsor, because

I'm pretty sure Marconi's is still closed for health-

code violations.

Saturday

Today was our first game of the season, and it

was at the elementary-school hall. Coach Patel

asked everyone to get there half an hour early so

we could go over the plan and warm up.

Mr Patel showed us a few new plays he designed,

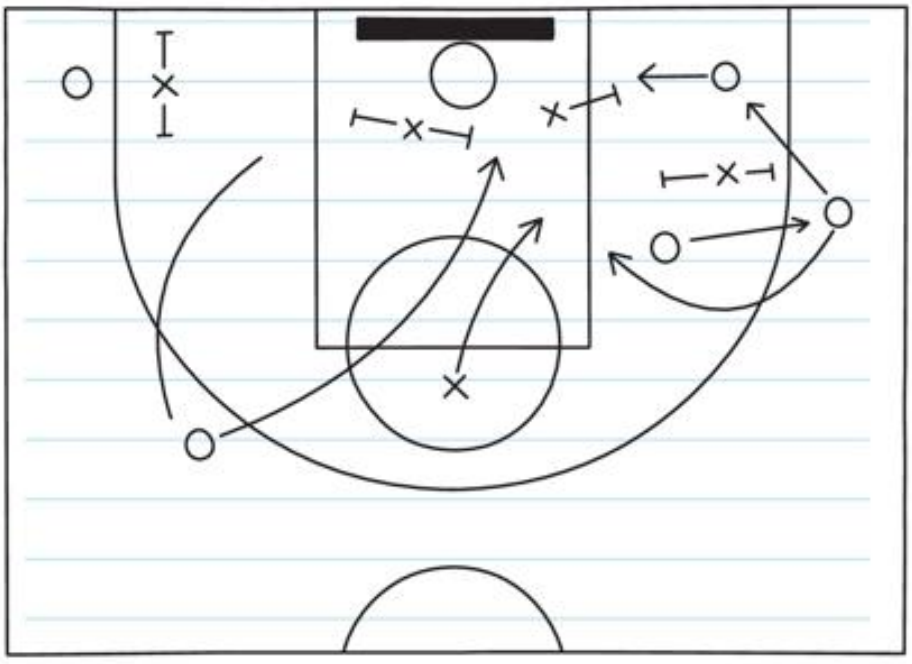
which looked like they must've taken all night

to draw up. I just hoped the other guys on

the team understood what all the little symbols

were supposed to mean, because it was complete

gibberish to ME.



While we were going over the plays, the stands

started filling up. I was nervous to play in front

of a crowd, but it turns out I didn't need to

worry about it. Because when Coach Patel put in

his starting line-up I wasn't in it.

We were playing against Franklin, which is a town

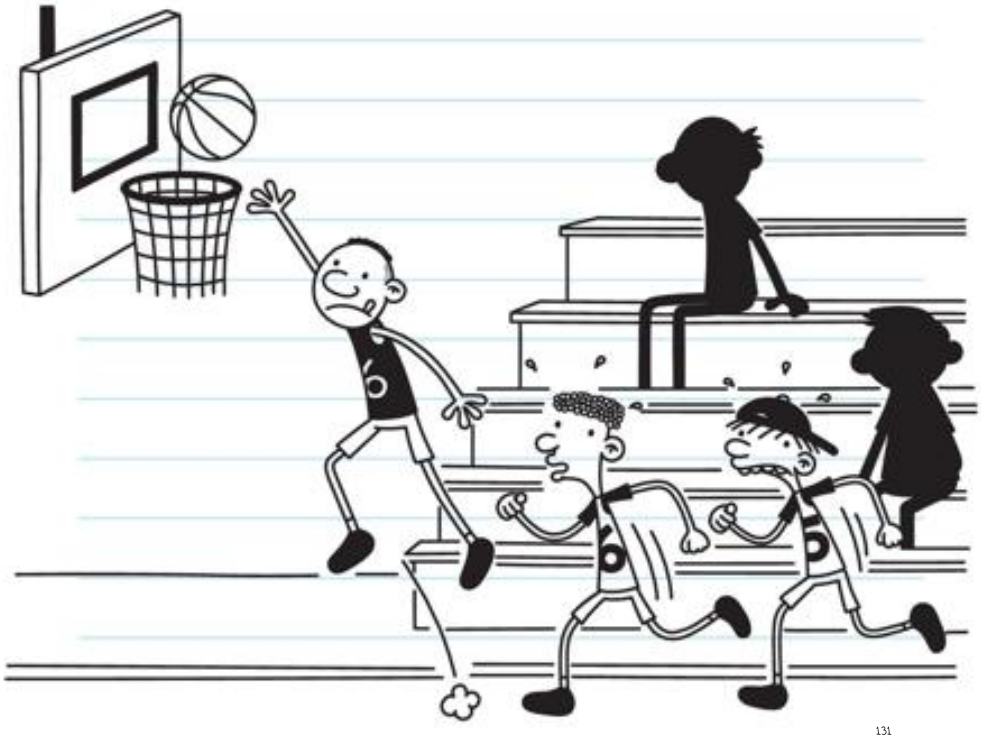
that's twenty minutes down the road from us.

Things got off to a rocky start when Franklin

won the opening tip-off and took it all the way

down to the other end for a lay-up. And that

set the tone for the rest of the game.



Kevin Pomodoro was our point guard, because he's the only kid on our team who can dribble while looking up. But Kevin was basically playing one-handed, because every time he needed to yell out one of Coach Patel's plays he'd have to take his retainer out so people could understand him.

Eventually the Franklin players caught on, and whenever Kevin would call a play they'd go for the steal.

Our team was trying its best to follow Coach

Patel's new plays, but I don't think anyone knew

who was an X and who was an O, so it was just

pure confusion out there.

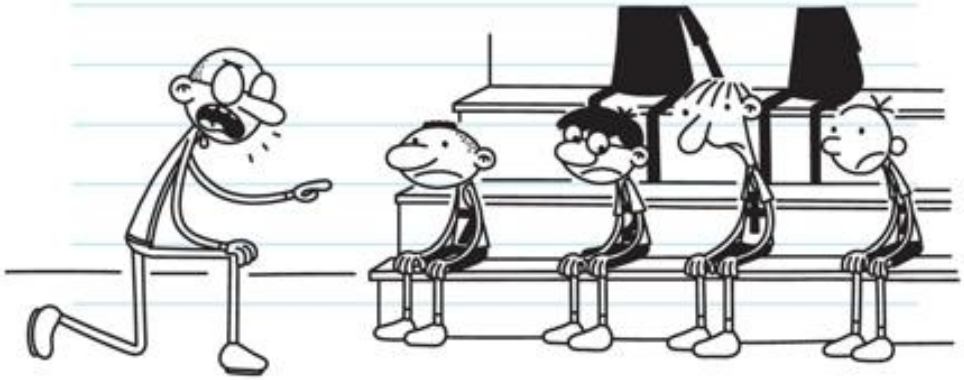
Coach Patel started yelling at the kids on

the bench like what was happening out there

was OUR fault. And I just acted like I was

ashamed because it seemed like that's what he was

looking for.



Coach Patel started subbing kids out of the game,

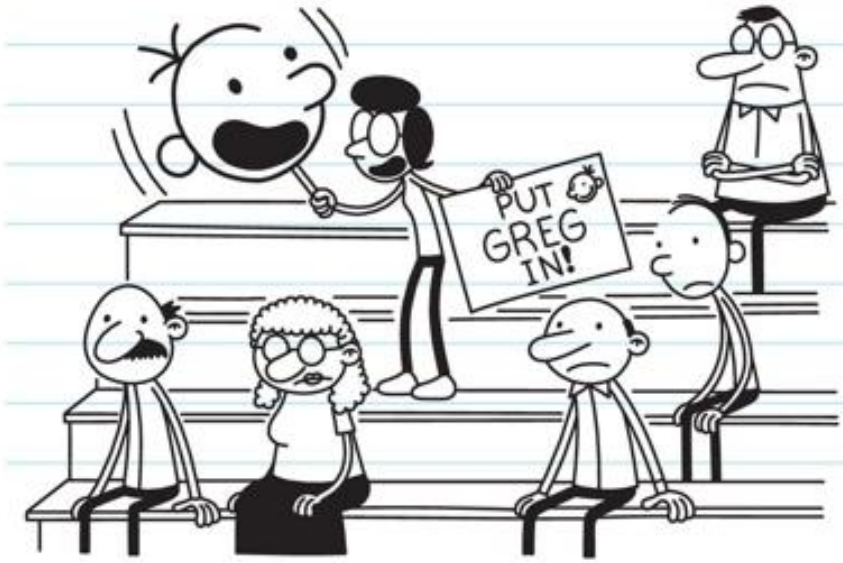
and I was getting worried he was gonna put ME

in. So I moved to the end of the bench and just

prayed he'd forget I was there.

But Mom was in the stands, and she wasn't

exactly helping.



Even though the elementary-school hall is our

home court, it's not like we have a home court

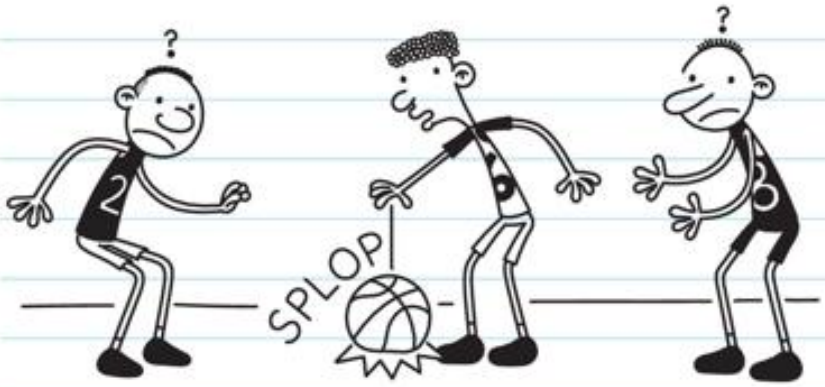
ADVANTAGE. First of all, the hall is about

seventy years old, and there are all sorts of dead

spots on the floor. So even when someone on our

team would try to get something going they'd end

up losing their dribble.



Plus, there's bubblegum and other crud caked on

the floor. And on a fast break Jabari Bruce

actually lost a shoe running down the court.

Whoever designed the hall did a lousy job, because

there's no room between the sidelines and the

walls. So anyone trying to save a ball from going

out of bounds is risking their LIFE.

On top of that, the doors to the restrooms are

close to the baseline. And in the first quarter

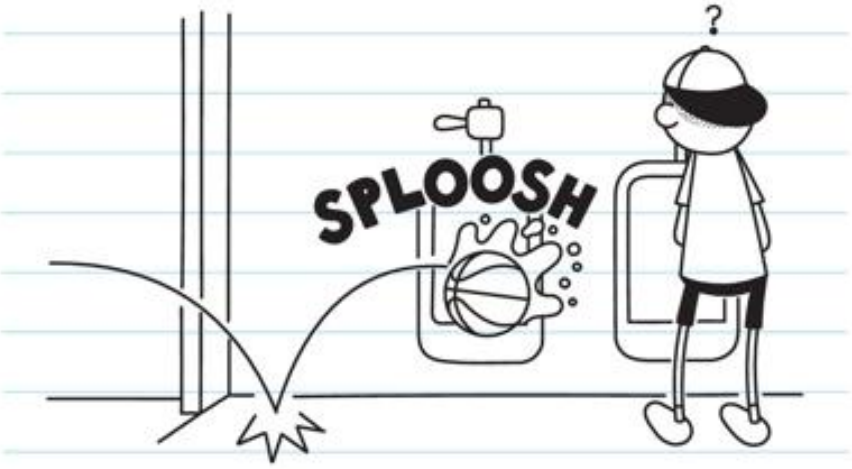
there was a line for the ladies' toilets.

To make matters worse, the guys who used the

men's toilets kept leaving the door open. And at

one point someone threw a bad pass and the ball

landed in the URINAL.



One of the refs washed the ball off in the sink

and then dried it with some paper towels. I don't

know what they pay those guys, but whatever it

is it's not ENOUGH.

Believe it or not, my team managed to score a handful of buckets. But when the buzzer went off, the score was 38–6. I was just glad that Coach Patel didn't put me in, because if he had I guarantee we would've lost by even MORE.

I've played enough sports to know that when the game's over you're supposed to shake hands with the other team and say it was a good game. So that's exactly what I DID.

But I wish someone had told me we were only at HALF-TIME, because maybe then I wouldn't have made such a fool of myself.

Coach Patel told us to meet in the locker room

so we could get ready for the second half. But

the elementary school didn't HAVE a locker room,

so we had to settle for the men's restroom. And

unfortunately it was occupied, so we didn't even

have it all to ourselves.

But that didn't stop Coach Patel from launching

into his half-time speech as soon as he stepped

into the room. I was a little bummed out that

Coach was making us listen to a speech at half-

time. Because, if you ask me, I think half-time

should be a BREAK from the game.

But Coach Patel started by going over everything

we were doing wrong, and all the adjustments we

needed to make in the second half if we wanted

to win.

Then he told us a story about this group of

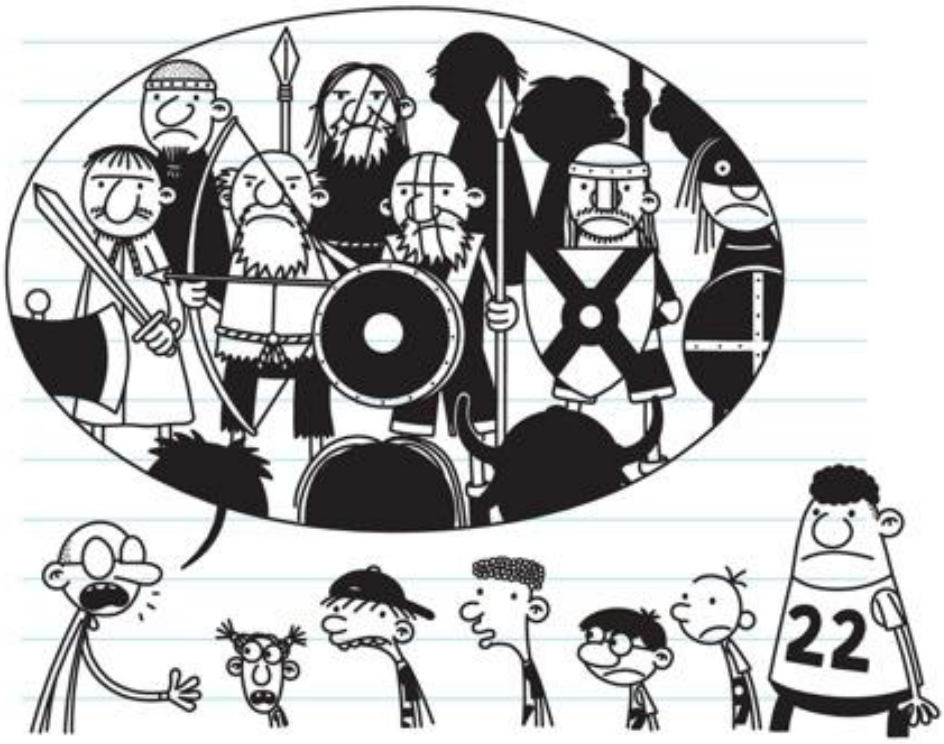
Scottish warriors from a long time ago. He said

they were surrounded by their enemies and were

totally outnumbered, but they won the battle by

sticking together and fighting with everything

they had.



He said, if we followed the game plan, maybe WE

could get a victory, too. And, I have to admit, it

was a pretty good speech, because by the time we

left that restroom we were ready to go to WAR.

There were still a few minutes to go before the

second half started, so everyone used the chance to

rehydrate.

The Woodleys were responsible for supplying the

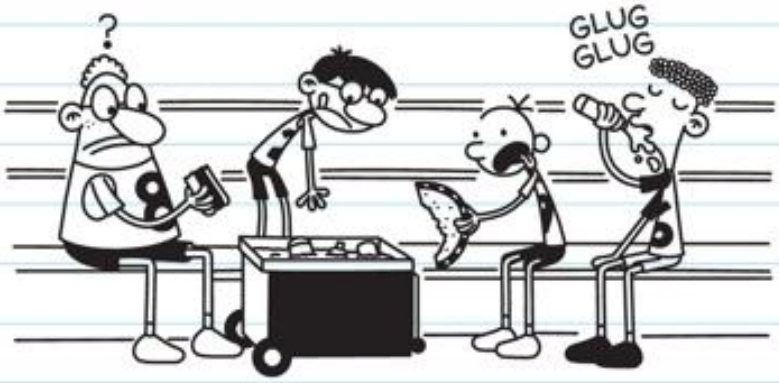
drinks for the first game, so we all helped ourselves

to bottles of water from the cooler.

But I guess the Woodleys never cleaned out their

cooler from the summer holidays, because there

were some LEFTOVERS in there, too.



There were even a half-filled bottle of ketchup and

a full bottle of mustard in the cooler, but Yusef and

Ruby weren't too choosy about their refreshments.

I guess they figured they'd take every bit of fuel

they could GET

Coach kept Yusef in for the whole first half,

and he was so sweaty that he had to wring out

his jersey. But I wished he hadn't wrung it out

into the COOLER, because there were still some

bottles of water in there.

Like I said, everyone was fired up after that

speech by Coach Patel. But I guess those guys in

Scotland had something we DIDN'T, because the

second half of the game started off a lot like the

FIRST.

Things got so out of control in the fourth

quarter that Coach Patel put me and the rest of

the bench in. But, if he was hoping we'd give our

team a spark and turn things round, he must've

been pretty disappointed.

To be honest, I can't even remember what the

final score was. All I remember was that on

the ride home Mom said our coach should've run

different plays and that I should've got more

playing time.

The only thing Dad said was that if this was

GOLFwe would've won, because we had the lowest

score. I guess they were both trying to make me

feel better, but it didn't really work.

Sunday

Mom's always saying how sport brings people

together, but I think she might actually be wrong

about that. Because in my experience sport just

tears us APART

The people in my town don't like the surrounding

towns because they always beat us in sports. But

the town we hate the most is Slacksville, because

those guys always DESTROY us.

It's been going on like this since before I was

born. And whenever an old-timer in my town

mentions Slacksville they always spit.

My town's issues with Slacksville go a lot deeper

than SPORTS, though. About a hundred years

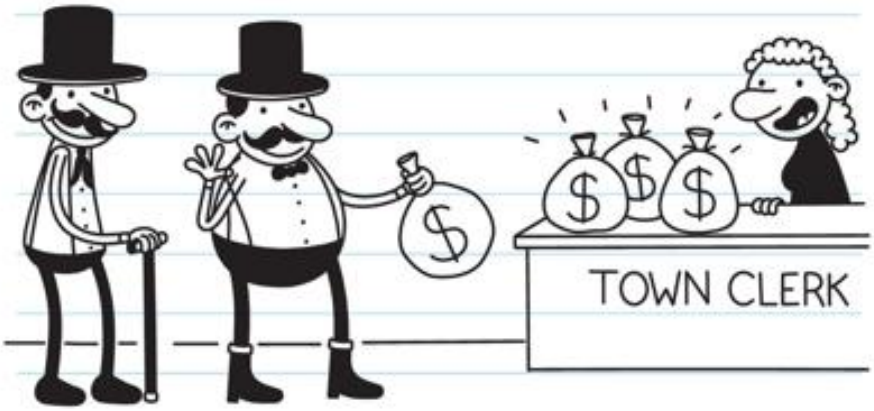
ago, we were supposed to get a jewellery factory

in our town, which would've brought in a lot of

jobs and money. But some bigwigs from Slacksville

swooped in at the last minute and stole the

factory from us.



These days, Slacksville's got ALL the good stuff,

like a mall and two golf courses. And all we've got

to show for ourselves is an abandoned drive-in

cinema and Marconi's Deli Bar.

So we're always looking for ways to get back at

those guys. And, since we can't beat them in

sports, we have to be CREATIVE.

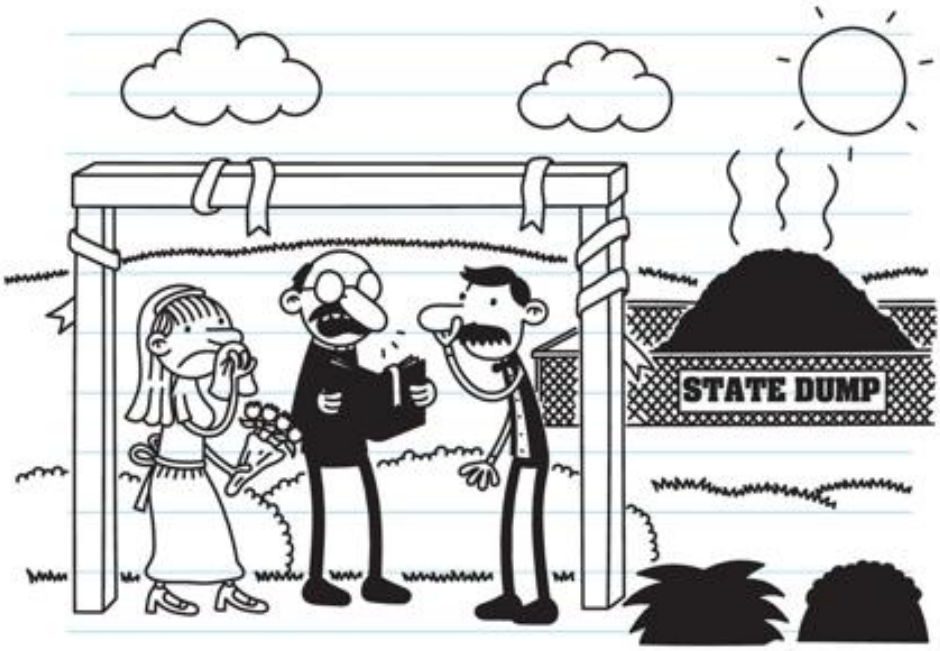
Last year, the state was planning on putting a

big garbage dump in our town. But we made some

changes to our zoning laws, so the state had

to put the dump in Slacksville instead. And I've

heard they're not too HAPPY about it, either.



It seemed like things were gonna change a few

months back when the mayor of Slacksville called

our mayor saying he wanted to make a peace

offering. Every year, our town has a giant

bonfire in the park on the Fourth of July, and

this year the people of Slacksville wanted to

donate the wood.

The timing was great, because our town was

out of money for recreational stuff and couldn't

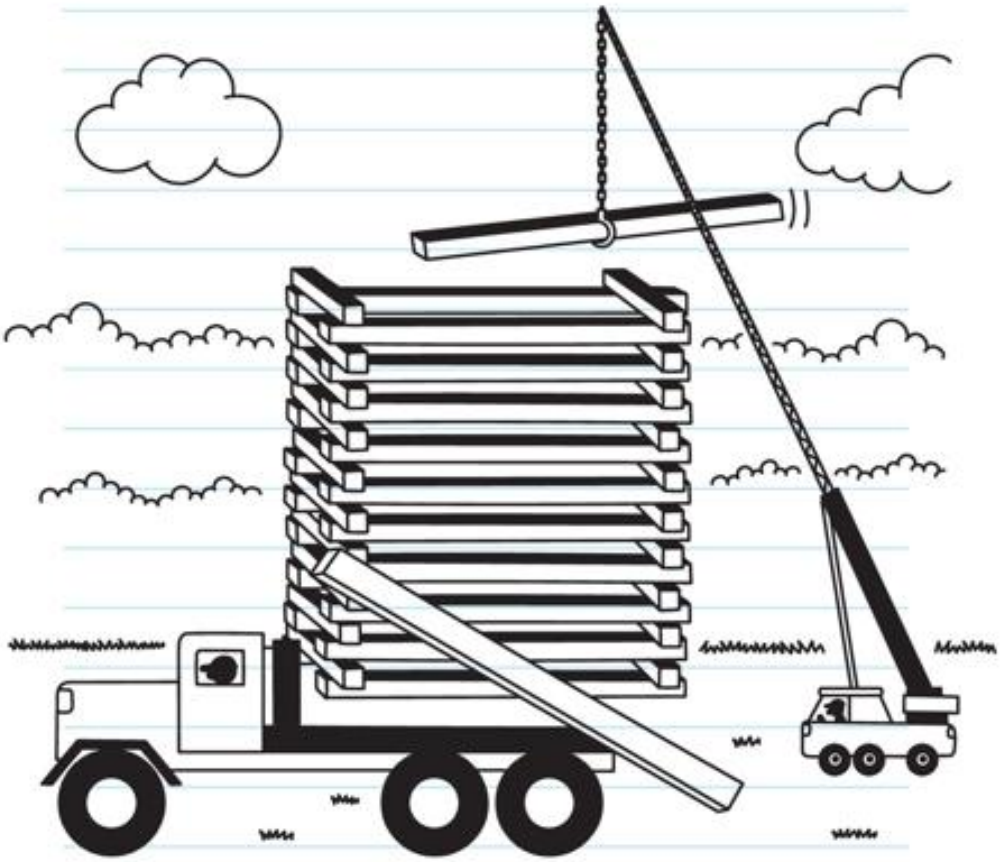
afford to do the bonfire this year anyway.

So our mayor gave the plan the green light, and

a few days later trucks started showing up from

Slacksville with piles of timber. And they even set

it all up for FREE.



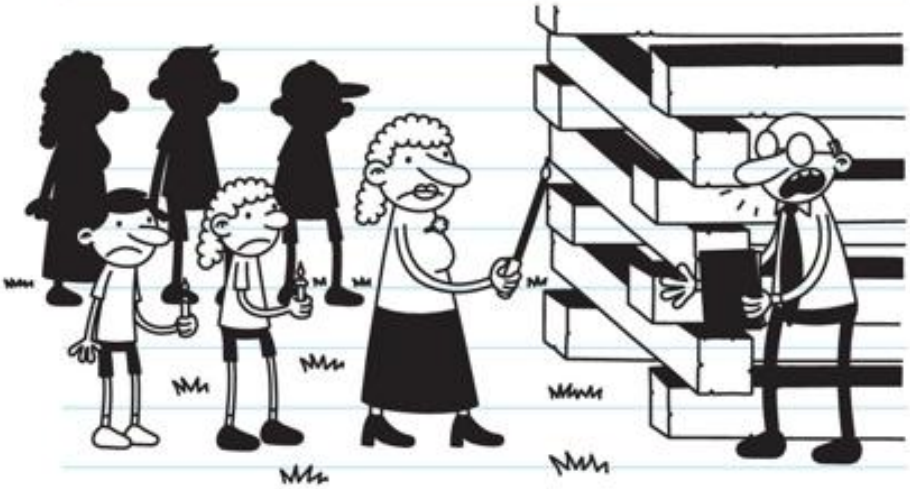
But right before we lit the fire on the Fourth

of July our health inspector came by the town

park and said the wood from Slacksville was

chemically treated, so we couldn't burn it because

it would release dangerous fumes into the air.



The next day, our mayor called the mayor

of Slacksville and told him he'd have to send

someone to haul the wood away. But I guess

their mayor already knew the wood was full of

chemicals and thought the whole thing was pretty

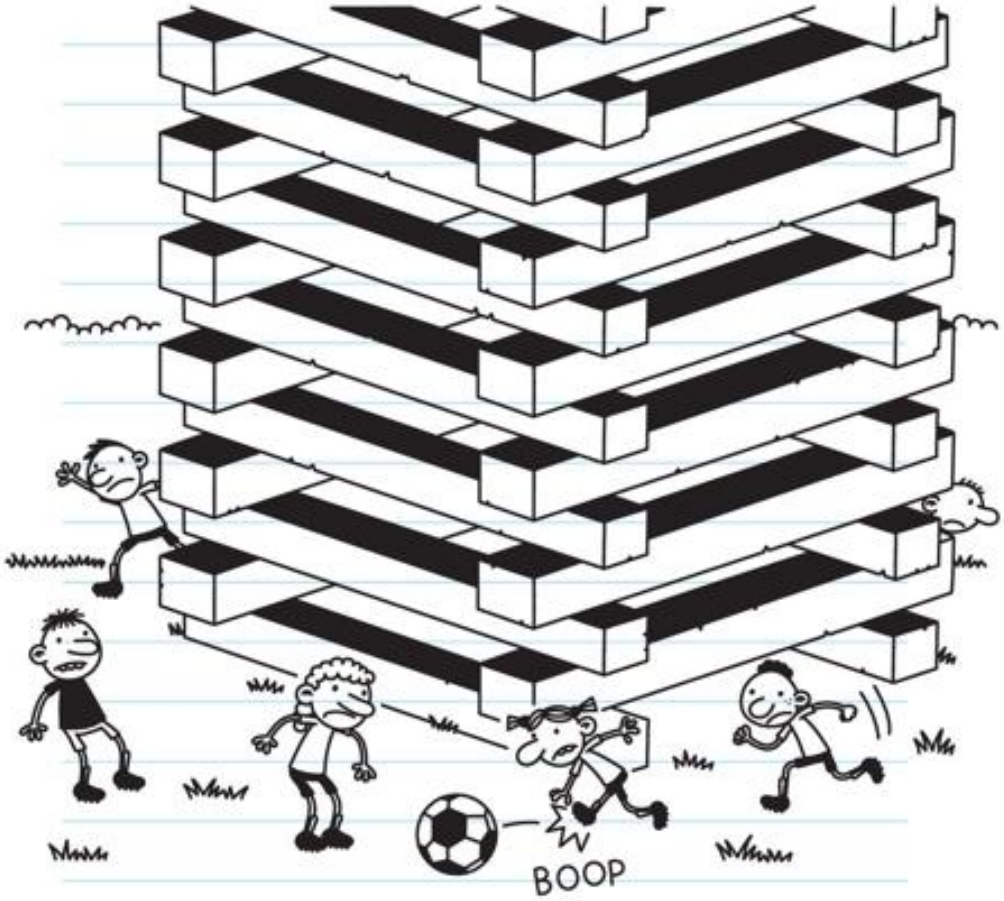
hilarious.

So now we've got a giant pile of rotting timber

in the middle of our town park, and this autumn

the pre-schoolers had to play their soccer games

AROUND it.



But their soccer season got cut short when a bunch

of animals moved into the woodpile, and everyone

agreed it was too dangerous for kids to keep

playing near it.

So I guess Slacksville has the last laugh, at least

for now.

The reason I'm bringing this stuff up is because

today was our first away game, and of course it

was in Slacksville. I got a queasy feeling when

we drove past the sign, because I haven't been

there in YEARS.

Our game was at Slacksville High, and their gym

was WAY better than ours. The court looked

brand new, and I didn't see a single piece of gum

on the floor.

The gym was packed before we got there, and

people started booing during warm-ups.

Only a few of our parents showed up to cheer

us on. I had to get a ride to the game with

Edward Mealy, because Mom said she needed to go

with Dad to Manny's pre-school play.

But I kind of wonder if Mom bailed on me because

she knew what was in store for our team in

Slacksville.

I was pretty anxious for the game to get started

so I could take my spot at the end of the bench.

But there were already people sitting in that spot,

and there wasn't any room for ME.

There was an empty space a few rows up in the stands, so, when the game started, that's where I went. But I was afraid people were gonna notice that I wasn't from Slacksville and give me a hard time. So, whenever the crowd booed my team, I did, too.

It was actually pretty easy to do, because we got off to another terrible start. Slacksville started the game by hitting a deep three-pointer, and then they stole the ball and hit ANOTHER one. And before long they were ahead by twenty points.

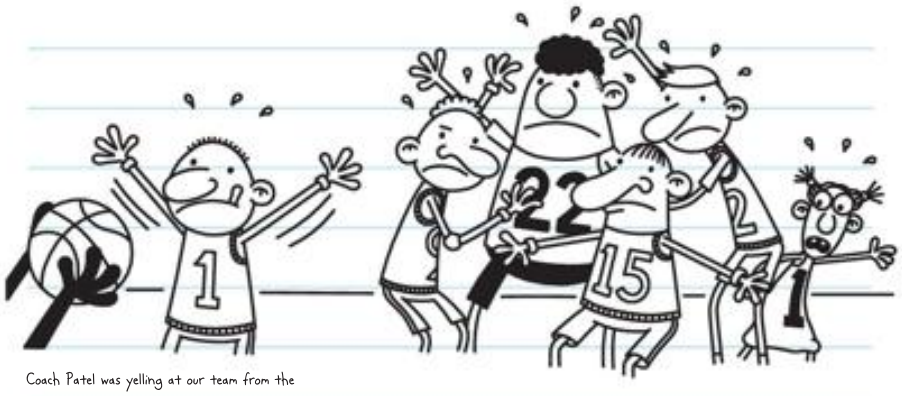
I thought that once they built up a lead they'd start to take it easy on us. But I guess everyone in Slacksville is still sore over the garbage dump, because they never let up.

They started running a full-court press, which

meant we couldn't even get the ball past half-court.

In fact, we couldn't even get the ball in play

because those Slacksville kids were all OVER us.



Coach Patel was yelling at our team from the

sidelines. But his voice was drowned out by the

Slacksville crowd.

Every once in a while my team would get the

ball inbounds, but then three or four Slacksville

players would swarm the kid who got the pass.

And we couldn't even get any rebounds, because

their centre was so big he actually made Yusef look

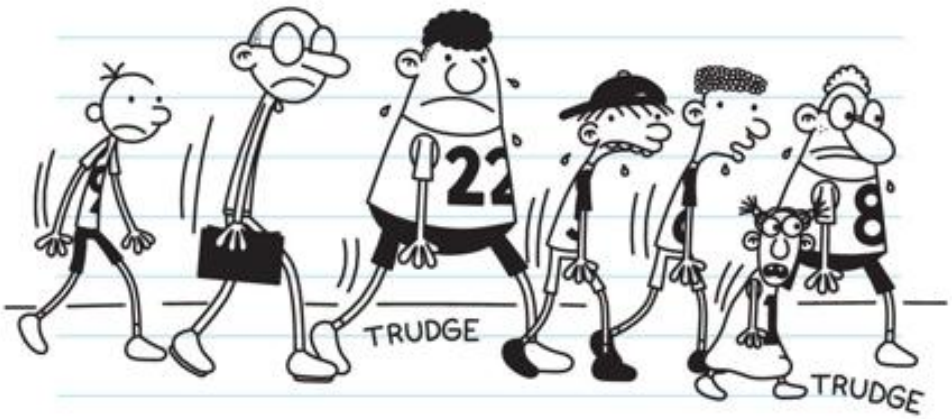
SMALL.

By half-time, the score was 52—0, and I was

hoping the refs would use the mercy rule and end

the game. But I guess they don't do that kind of

thing in basketball.

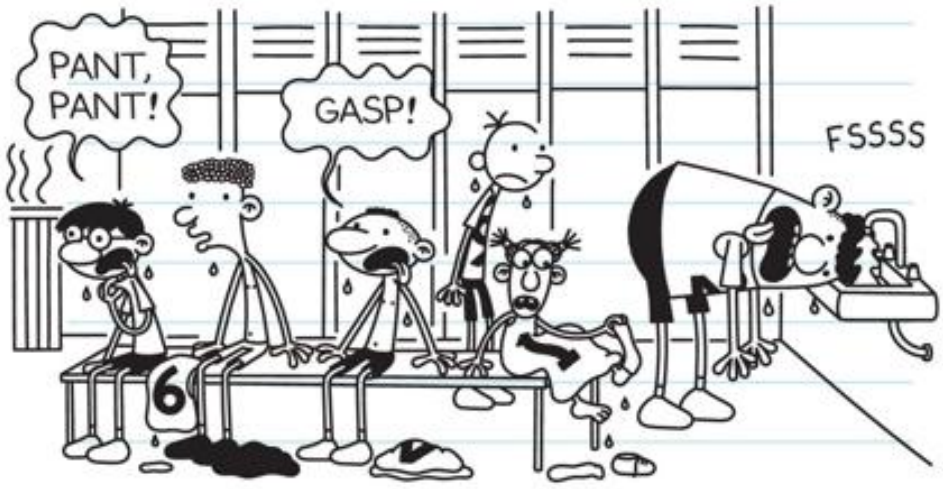


I'm pretty sure the people who run the

Slacksville school gym turned up the heat in the

visitors' locker room just to make us uncomfortable,

because it was like a SAUNA in there.



Coach Patel gave another speech, but this one

wasn't about Scottish armies or anything like

that. It was about PRIDE.

He said that when we stepped onto the floor

we were representing our TOWN. Then he said

we shouldn't even look at the score, because the

only thing that mattered now was how hard we

FOUGHT.

And that got everyone just as fired up as the

speech in our first game.

But a few kids on my team took Coach Patel too

LITERALLY. Because, when the second half

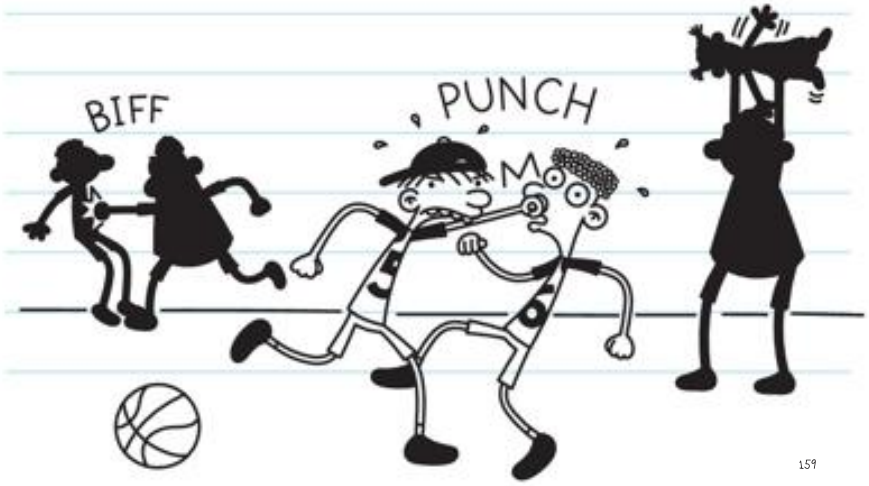
started, our team was ready to fight for REAL.

Yusef got things started by throwing an elbow,

then Ruby Bird took down Slacksville's centre.

Then the Woodley brothers started going at it

with each OTHER for some reason.



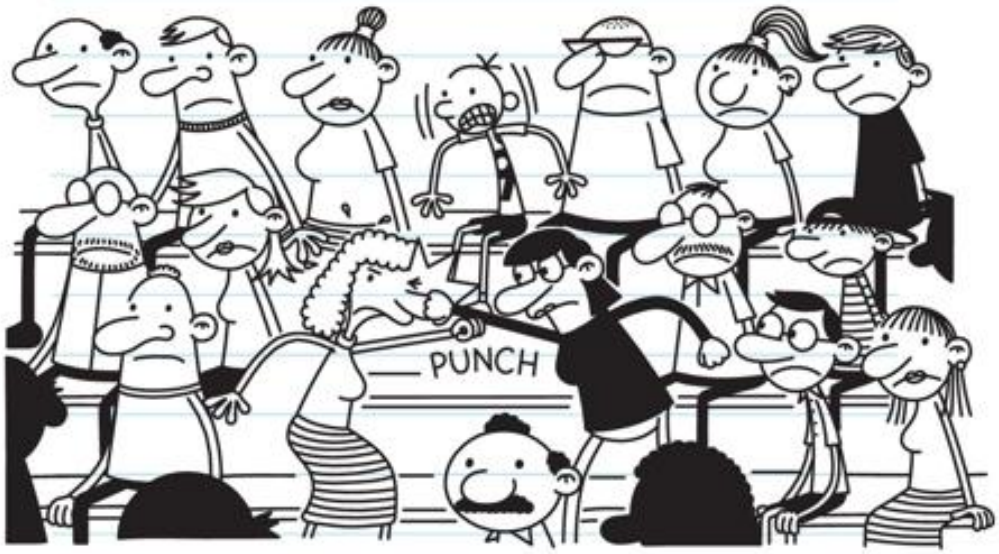
But the refs had BIGGER problems to deal

with. Kevin Pomodoro's mother and one of the

Slacksville moms started arguing in the stands,

and the next thing you knew they were throwing

haymakers.



The refs went into the stands to break it up, so

I decided to make myself some room on the bench,

because it was a lot SAFER there.

But I wished I had stayed where I was, because

when Ruby and Yusef got ejected for fighting the

coach put me in the game along with Tommy Chu.

The Slacksville coach pulled his starters to give

them a rest, and he put in his bench players, too.

Coach Patel told our team to run one of the plays

he taught us at practice. And, believe it or not,

the play actually WORKED.

Now the score was 52—2, and the Slacksville

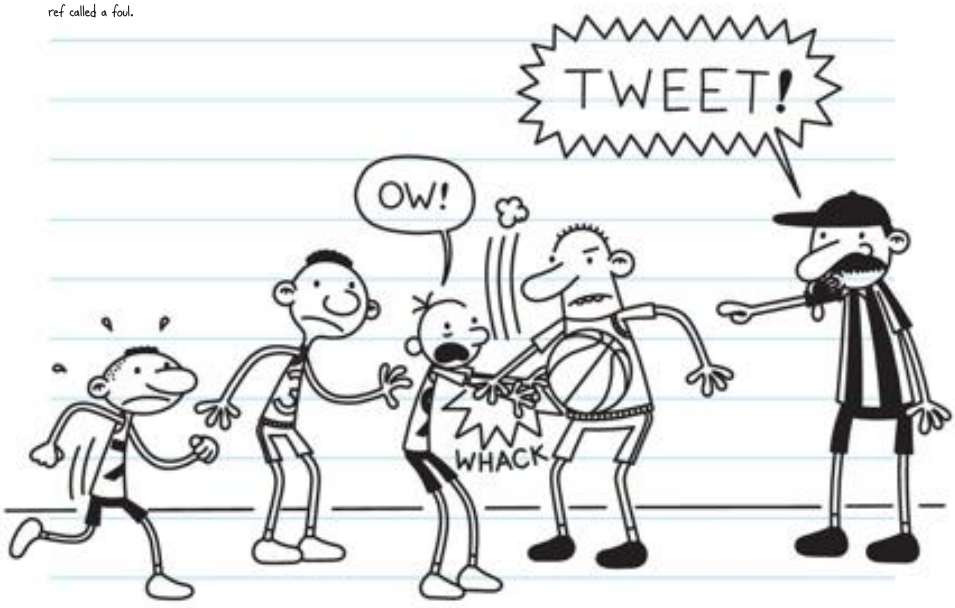
crowd was really annoyed because they thought

they were gonna CRUSH us.

So the Slacksville coach put all his starters back in the game. They reeled off twenty-three straight points, and it seemed like there was nothing we could do to stop them.

I didn't understand any of Coach Patel's plays, so I just ran up and down the court and tried to look like I knew what I was doing. But then Kevin got flanked, and he threw the ball to ME.

I didn't know WHAT I was supposed to do, so I just tried to throw the ball to get RID of it. But a Slacksville player hacked me on the arm and the ref called a foul.

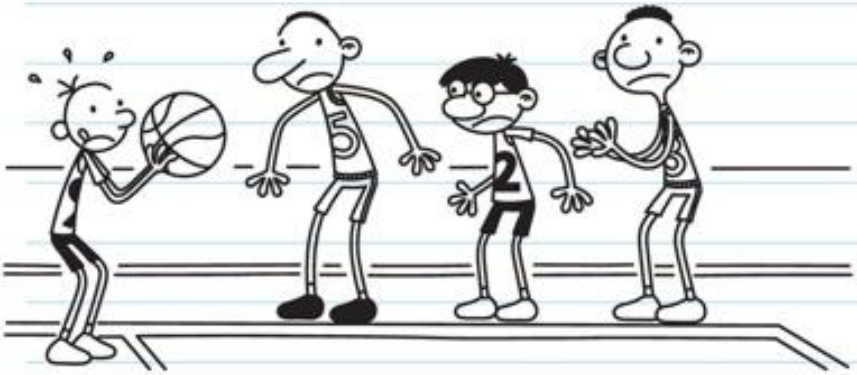


The ref put me at the free-throw line and gave

me the ball. And I really wished I remembered

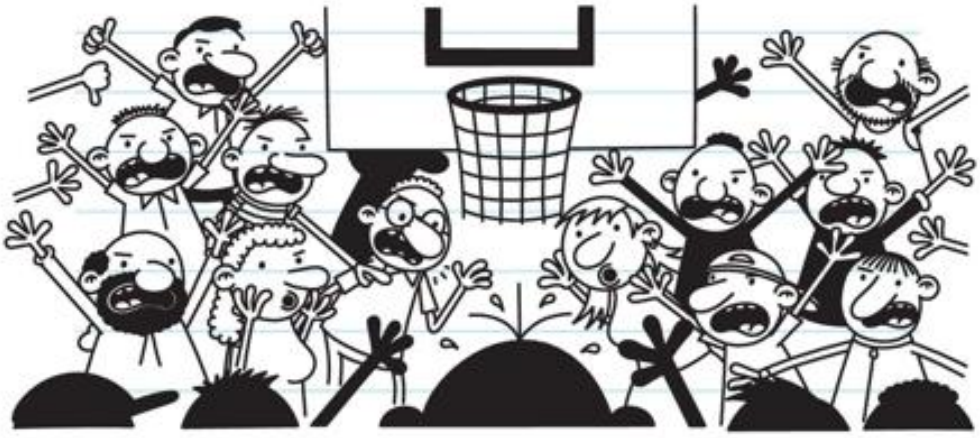
the stuff Coach Patel taught us about shooting

technique, because everyone's eyes were on me.



And the Slacksville crowd wasn't exactly making it

easy to CONCENTRATE.



I think fans should have to be QUIET when a

player's trying to shoot a free throw, but when

I tried to get them to be more respectful it

didn't work.

I totally whiffed my shot, and the crowd let me

hear about it. But at least it was OVER.

Then the ref gave me the ball and told me to shoot

AGAIN. I thought he was just being nice by giving

me another try, but it turns out that when there's

a shooting foul you get TWO shots.

I didn't want to miss AGAIN, so I thought about

shooting it backwards to at least have a CHANCE

of making it. But I didn't wanna make Coach Patel

mad, and decided to try a granny shot, where you

throw the ball from between your legs.

But, when I airballed that one, even the

GRANNIES laughed at me.

After that, I was ready to go back to my spot

on the bench. So I subbed myself out of the

game, which I found out later is not actually a

thing a player is supposed to do.

Slacksville kept running up the score, and before

long it was 98—2. Then one of their players hit a

three-pointer, so now they had 101 points. But

the scoreboard could only display two digits for

each team, so all of a sudden it looked like we were

AHEAD.

So we started going CRAZY on the bench, and

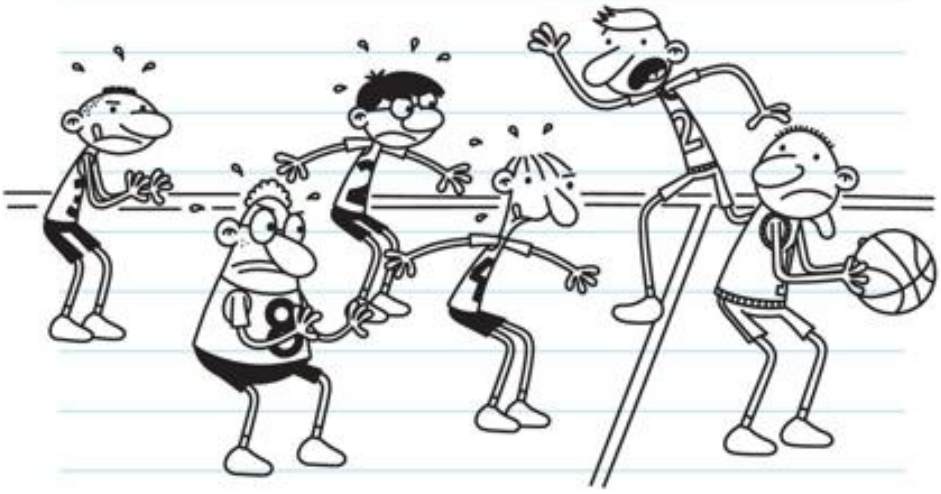
that really ticked off the Slacksville crowd.

The clock was winding down, and Slacksville tried to

move the ball up the court. But now our team was

playing with PRIDE, and we locked it down on

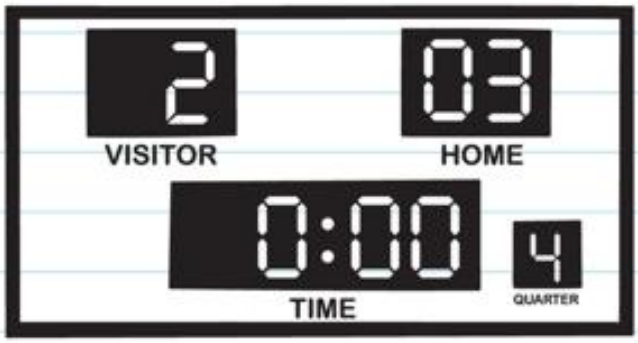
the defensive end.



Slacksville managed to get past us, and they

hit a lay-up. So when the final buzzer went off

they had LAPPED us.



The only thing that made me feel better was

when Mr Mealy stopped at the Slacksville dump

to get rid of an old mattress. We might not ever

beat those guys in sports, but at least our town

doesn't SMELL.

Tuesday

I wish I could say that after Slacksville our team got better and we won a few games during the season, but that's not what happened. In fact, things just got worse and worse as the season went on.

After the Slacksville game, Mr Marconi from Marconi's Deli Bar called Coach Patel and told him he didn't want to sponsor our team any more. But by then it was too late to change our uniforms, so we just used electrical tape to black out the logos.

And that turned into a problem, because in our

next game one of the kids on the other team got

electrical tape from Yusef's jersey stuck to his face.

Then when the kid's mom removed the tape she

pulled his eyebrow clean OFF.

Whenever we'd start to fall behind in a game, Mom

would let Coach Patel know what he should be doing

differently. And I'm not sure he really appreciated

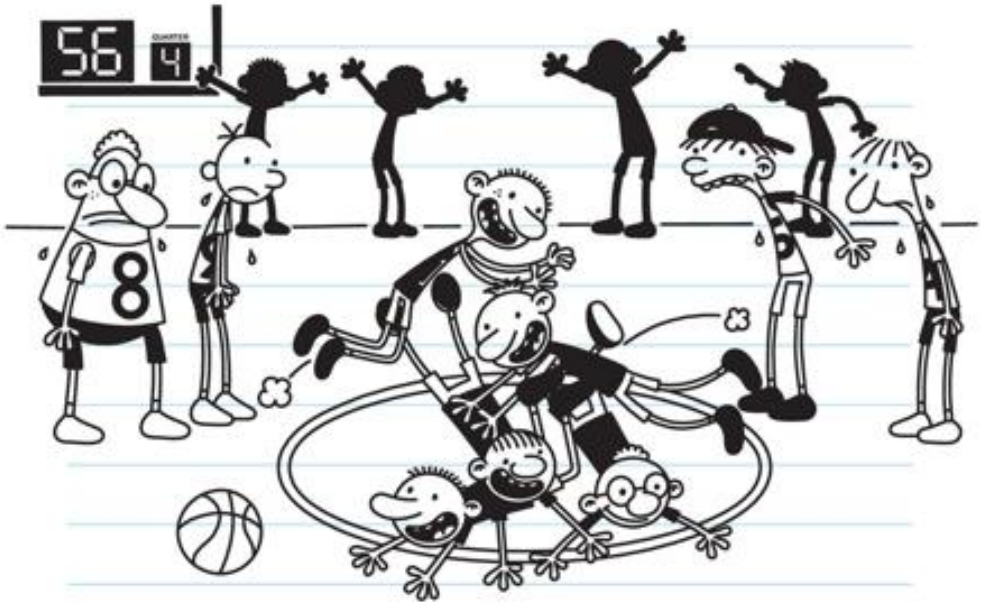
her advice.

Somewhere along the line, the other teams' coaches

started feeling SORRY for us, so they'd play

their substitutes instead of their starters. But

that didn't change the RESULTS.



The parents on our team started complaining to

the junior league that we were losing by too many

points, and it wasn't good for our self-esteem. So

the league made some rule changes to help keep

things under control.

The new rules said that if your team was ahead by

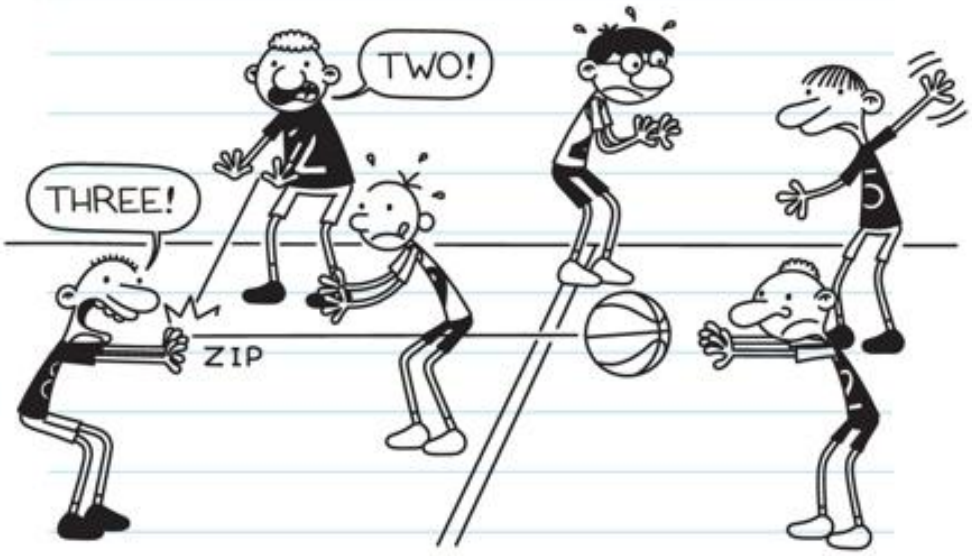
twenty or more points you had to pass five times

before you took a shot.

And that did actually keep the score down, but it

was pretty humiliating when the kids on the other

team counted their passes out LOUD.



Then teams started trying to keep their scores

down on their OWN. And they tried all sorts of

things, like only dribbling with their left hands

and even closing their eyes when they shot.

But the scores were STILL lopsided, so halfway

through the season the junior league did

something a little more drastic to help us win.

One weekend they dropped us down a whole age

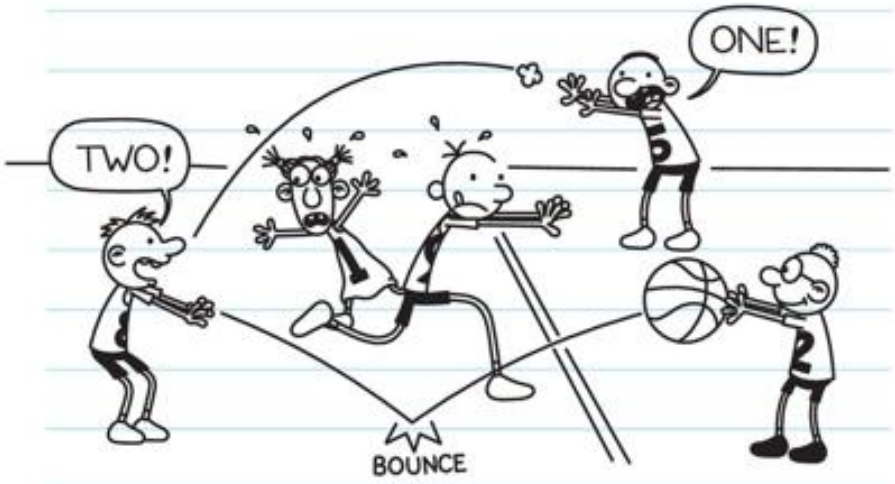
group, and the week after that they dropped us

down ANOTHER level.

And there's nothing like having your butt handed

to you by a bunch of elementary-school kids to

make you feel good about yourself.

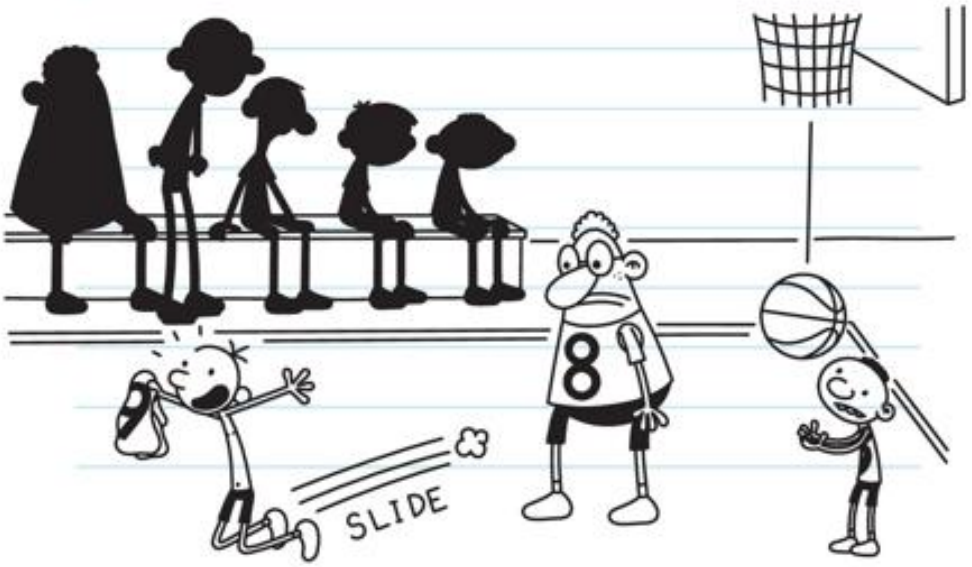


I only made one basket the entire season, but it

was on the wrong hoop. And I guess Coach Patel

wanted me to have my moment, so he didn't even

say anything when it happened.



By the end of the season, only Mom and a few

other parents came to the games. And by then

even the REFS weren't paying attention.

We were so happy when the season finally ended

that we gave Coach Patel one of those victory

baths like they do when a team wins a championship.

But I hope he took a REAL shower when he got

home, because that thing was full of SWEAT.

After our last game, we had an end-of-season

banquet at Marconi's Deli Bar. And the only

reason Mr Marconi agreed to host it was because

his restaurant still wasn't officially open and he

needed the business. But I avoided any food with

mayonnaise in it, just in case.

Coach Patel handed out awards, and every player

got one. But, since no one was any GOOD this

season, he had to get creative.

After we had cake, Coach Patel gave a speech.

He said that we might not have won any games,

but he was proud of us for trying our hardest and

never giving up.

Then he said that, even though there probably

weren't any future professional athletes on our team,

there were a lot of OTHER exciting careers out

there, like accounting and web design and puppetry.

It wasn't as inspiring as some of the other

speeches he gave during the season, but I guess

they can't all be winners.

I was just glad the season was finally OVER,

because it meant I could go back to my regular

life. And I'm pretty sure my teammates felt the

same way. But the one person who couldn't let it

go was MOM.

Before Mr Patel got in his car to leave, Mom told

him about this state tournament for teams that

hadn't won any games during the season. Then she

showed him a flyer she'd printed out.

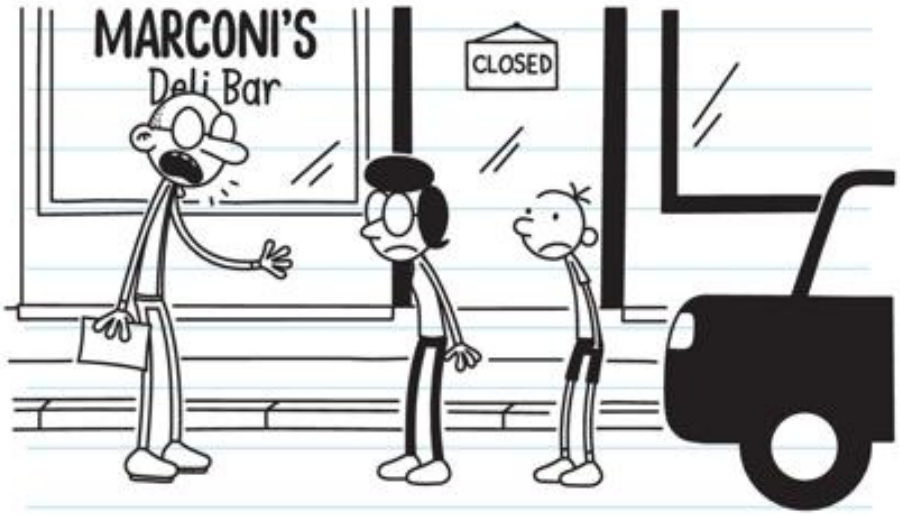
I really wished Mom had asked me about this

FIRST because the last thing I wanted was to

play more BASKETBALL. But luckily Mr Patel

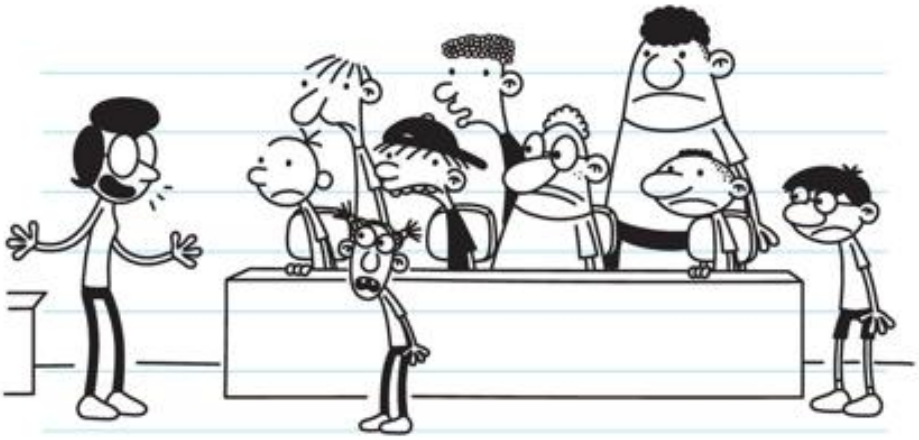
felt the same way.

Mr Patel told Mom that our team was hopeless at basketball and he wasn't willing to put us through any more misery. And, even though it sounded a little harsh, Mom didn't argue with him.



A week later, Mom invited the whole team to our house. I thought this was one of those end-of-the-season parties where you have pizza and maybe watch a movie or something, but it was a whole other THING.

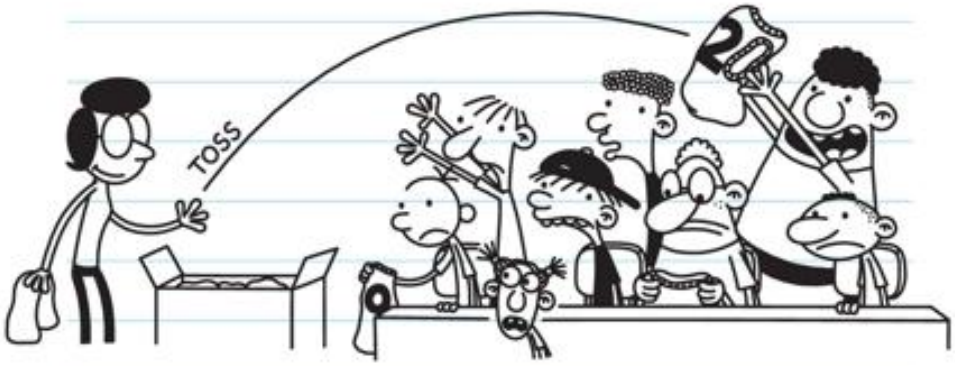
Once everyone got to our house, Mom said she had an announcement to make. She said she was going to enter us into the Second Chance Tournament and that SHE was gonna be our coach.



Then she said we were going to enter the

tournament as a whole new team for a fresh start,

and she started handing out uniforms.



Everyone got kind of excited, because these

uniforms looked EXPENSIVE. The jerseys had

blue-and-gold stitching, and each kid's last name

was written on the back. There was no sponsor

this time, so I'm guessing Mom paid for these out

of her own pocket.

On the front of each jersey was the picture of

one of those sledge dogs you see in Alaska. And

Mom explained that our team was gonna be the

HUSKIES, just like her middle-school basketball

team.

It was pretty obvious Mom was just trying to

relive her glory days through US, but I didn't

really care. Because, like I said, those uniforms

were NICE.

Mom said that this time around we were gonna be

WINNERS. And that sounded a whole lot better

than being accountants and puppeteers.

Thursday

The big tournament is less than a week away, so

our team doesn't have a ton of time to prepare.

But after our first practice I'm kind of glad we

DON'T.

Mom's coaching style is completely different from

Mr Patel's. Instead of working on our basketball

skills, we did a bunch of touchy-feely team-building

exercises.

I just hope Mom knows what she's doing, because

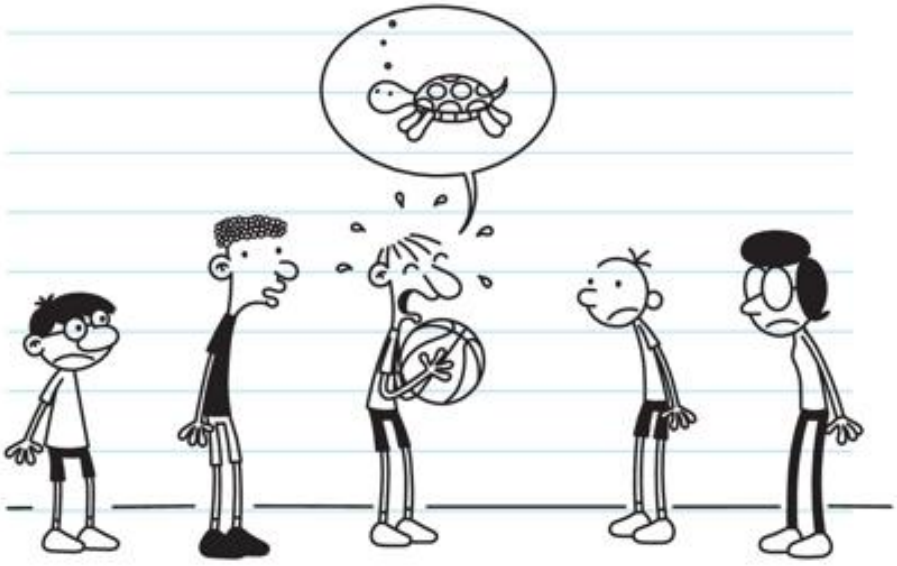
I don't see how that stuff is gonna help us win

any games.

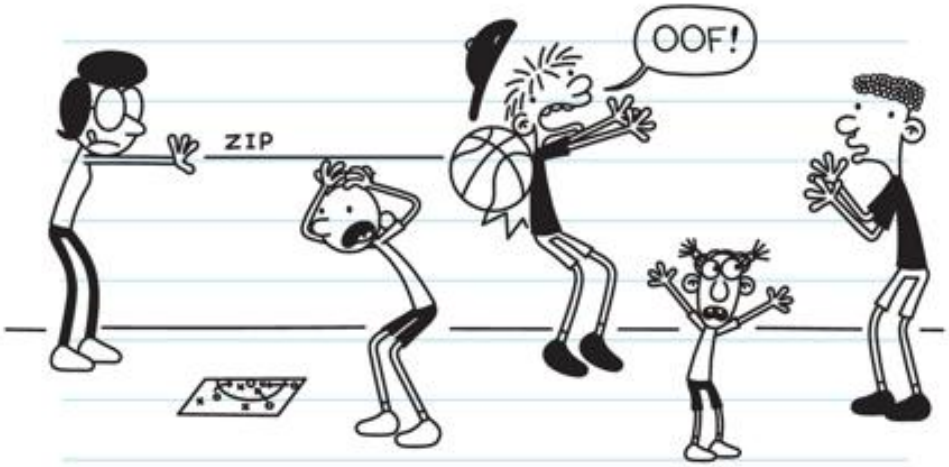
One of the exercises was supposed to help us get to know each other better. We stood in a circle, and when you threw the ball to another player you had to tell everyone something about yourself. So, when it was my turn to throw the ball, I said that I liked mint chocolate-chip ice cream.

But when Edward Mealy got the ball he finally started TALKING. He told us how his stepmom is really strict and how she doesn't like his pet turtle that he got for his birthday.

In fact, he went on for so long that Mom had to take the ball from him and hand it to someone else.



After that, we played some actual basketball. Mom tried teaching us a few plays that her team used the year they reached the state finals, but we were having trouble getting the hang of things.



I didn't think the fact that we were terrible was such a BAD thing. I've seen a bunch of those movies about teams who are underdogs, but then they pull together and win in the end. And I've been wondering if WE could do that.

But the players who are on those teams never make any money, because they're not the ones telling the story. So I've been thinking that, if we turn into one of those teams that inspires a movie, I'M gonna be the one to cash in.

So before practice tonight I put together a

permission form and got my teammates to sign it.

I _____ hereby authorize Greg Heffley to use my likeness and image in a film or television series and any subsequent sequels, throughout the universe and in perpetuity.

_____
SIGN HERE

The only person who gave me an issue about it was

Yusef, who said he'd have to ask his parents before

he could sign the form. But after I promised to

give him my lunch snacks for the next three days

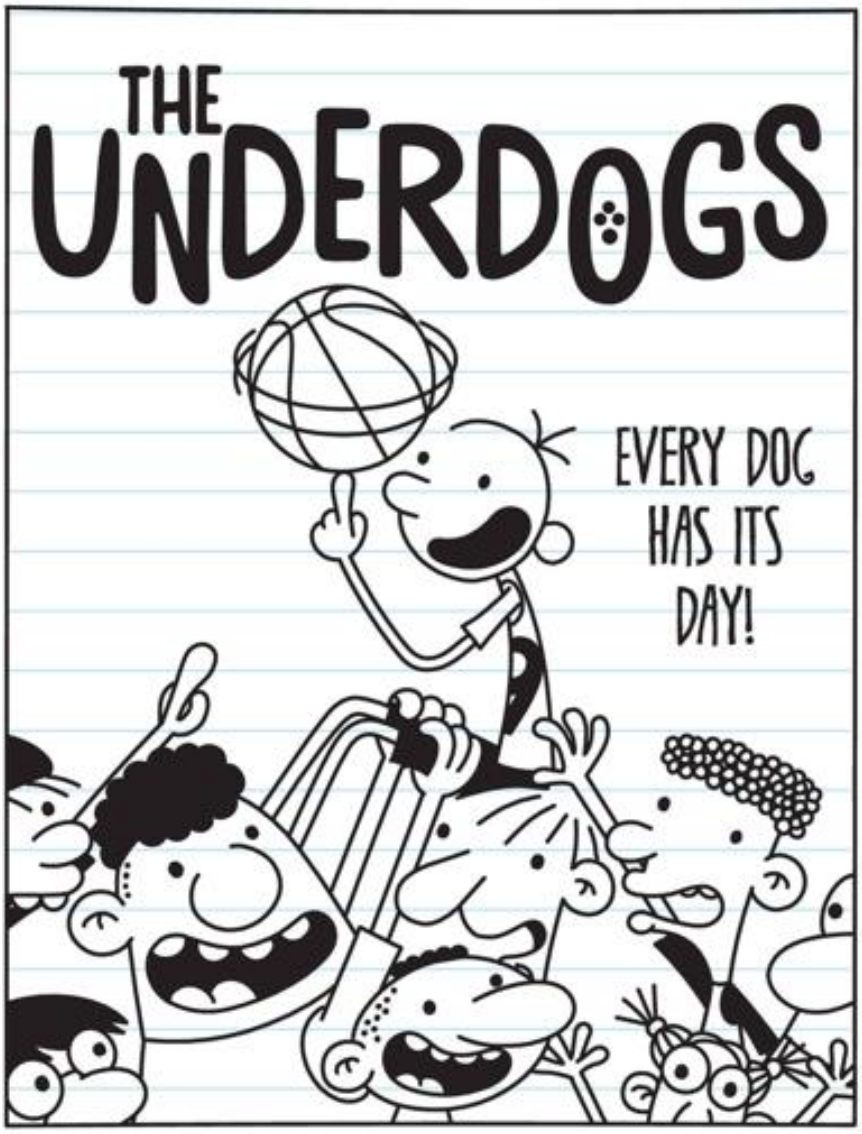
he was on board, too.

All we need to do NOW is win this tournament so

I can sell the rights to one of those studios that

makes feel-good movies. And I can already see

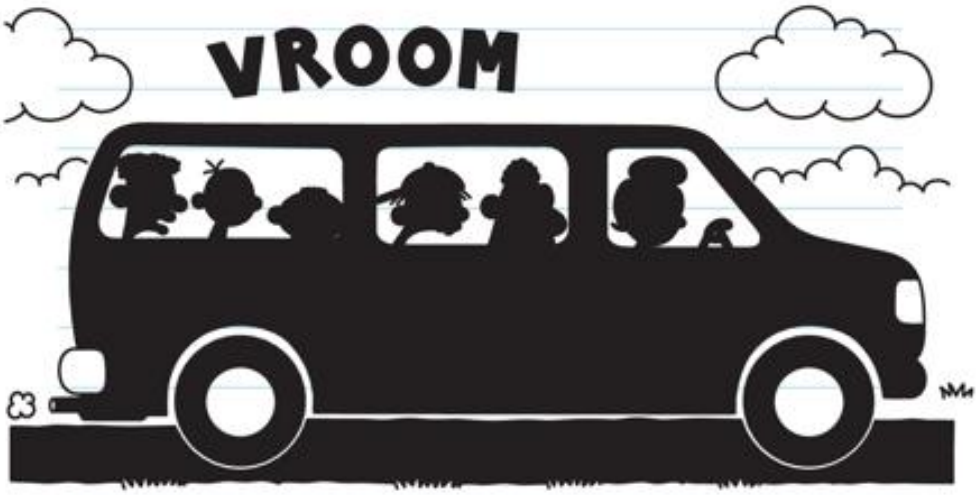
the poster in my head.



Sunday

The Second Chance Tournament was halfway across the state. I guess my teammates' parents were burned out on basketball, because none of them wanted to make the drive.

So yesterday Mom rented a big van to get the team to the tournament. She said there was a chance we'd play for two days, so everyone had to pack an overnight bag.



Some kids packed WAY too much for one night.

Yusef brought two loaves of bread and a bunch of supplies for sandwiches, plus a backpack filled with chocolate-covered raisins.

Jabari brought his video-game system and a computer monitor so we could all play games in the van. But I guess it was too much for the vehicle's electrical system to handle, because we had to pull into a garage when the circuit board got overloaded.

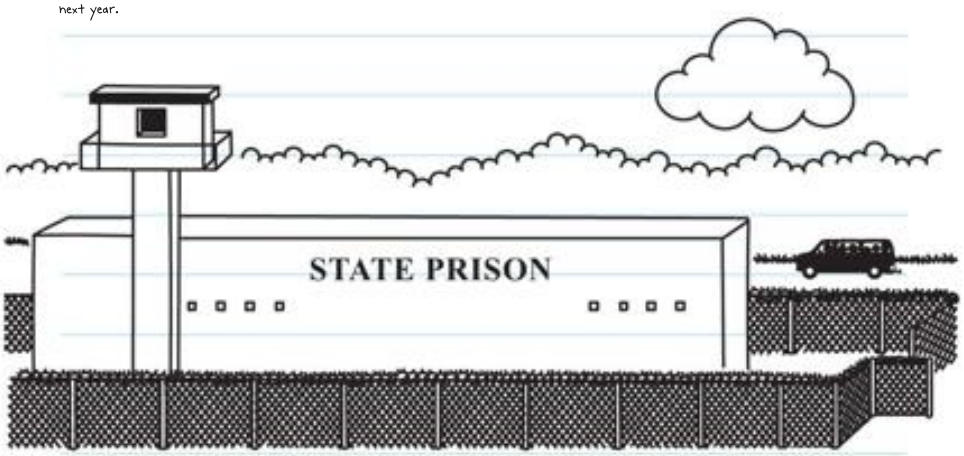
We made another pit stop when Yusef needed to use the restroom after eating half of the chocolate-covered raisins all by himself. And, even though we left two hours earlier than we needed to, we barely made it to the tournament on time.

Since this was a big competition, I thought it would be held at a college campus or a convention centre or something.

So I was pretty disappointed when we pulled up

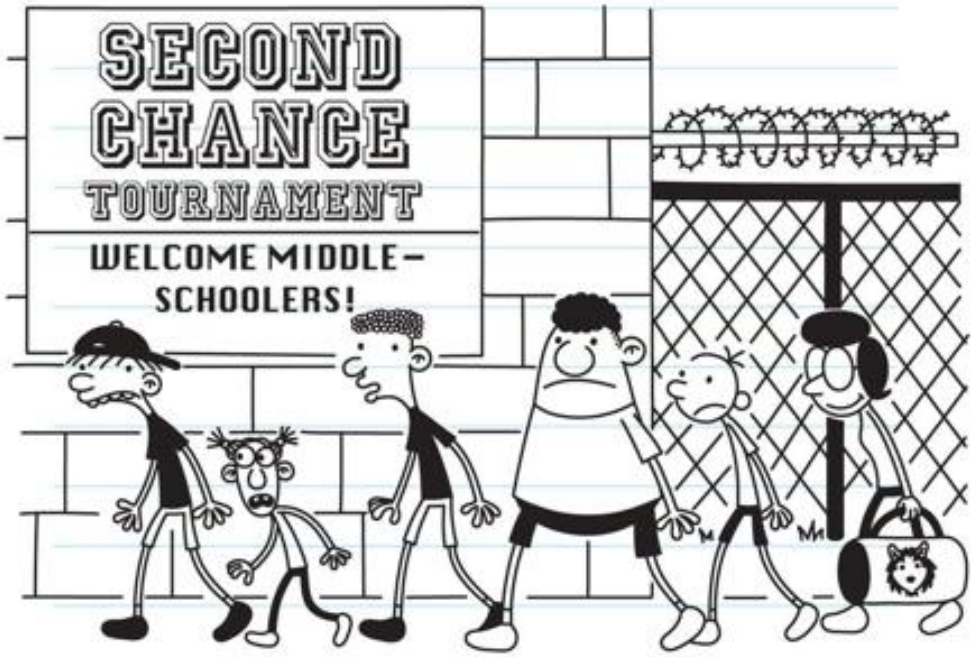
at the old prison that's scheduled to be torn down

next year.



But I guess that's just the way it is when your

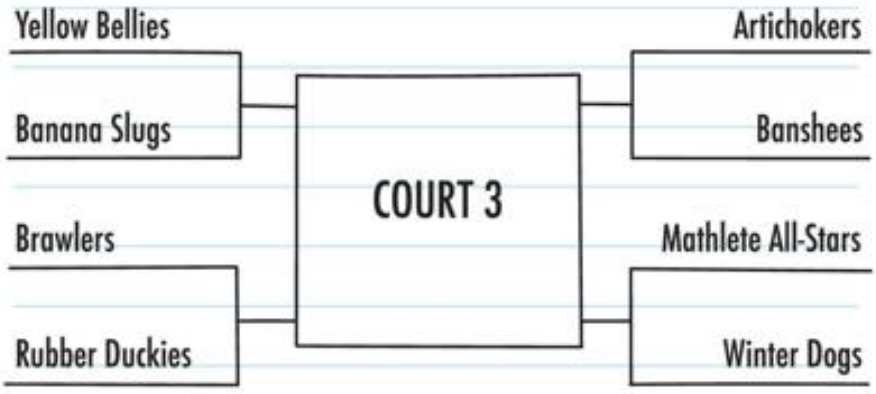
team is one of the worst in the state.



When Mom went to the desk to register, she got some bad news. There was already a team called the Huskies in the tournament, so she had to come up with ANOTHER name. And I guess Mom was feeling stressed that we were late, so she just wrote down the first name that popped into her head.

SECOND CHANCE
TOURNAMENT
REGISTRATION FORM
Team name: Winter Dogs

But when I saw the names of some of the OTHER teams we were competing against, I didn't feel so bad about ours.



The games were being held in a big open area that

must've been used as a cafeteria when the prison

was open. There was a sign with a list of rules

written on it, and I'm not sure if it was for US

or for the prisoners.

The courts were side by side, which meant there

wasn't any room for fans to watch the games.

But that was OK, because it looked like nobody

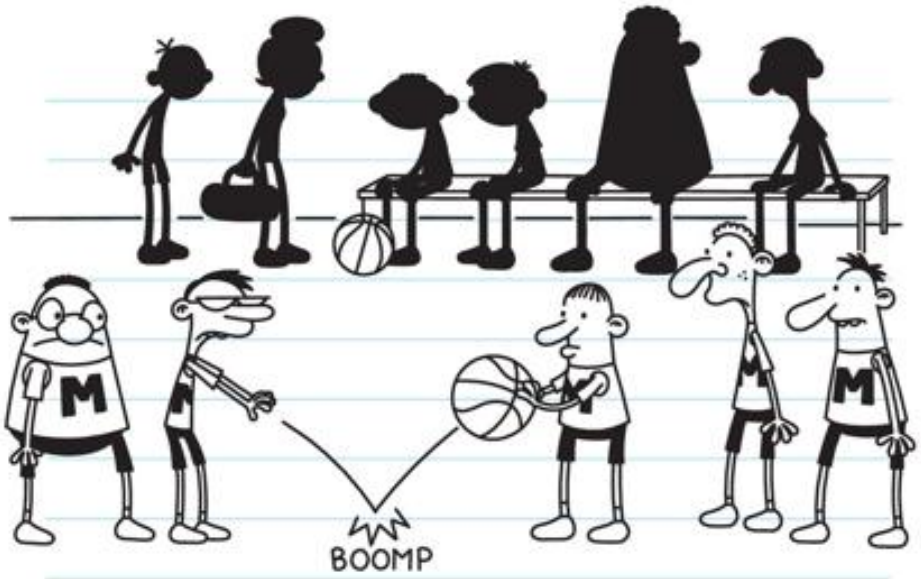
ELSE'S parents had come to this thing, either.

Our opponents were already warming up on Court

Three. And, I have to admit, I was a little

relieved that we were playing the Mathlete

All-Stars in round one.



But I shouldn't have underestimated them, because

these guys made up for their lack of basketball

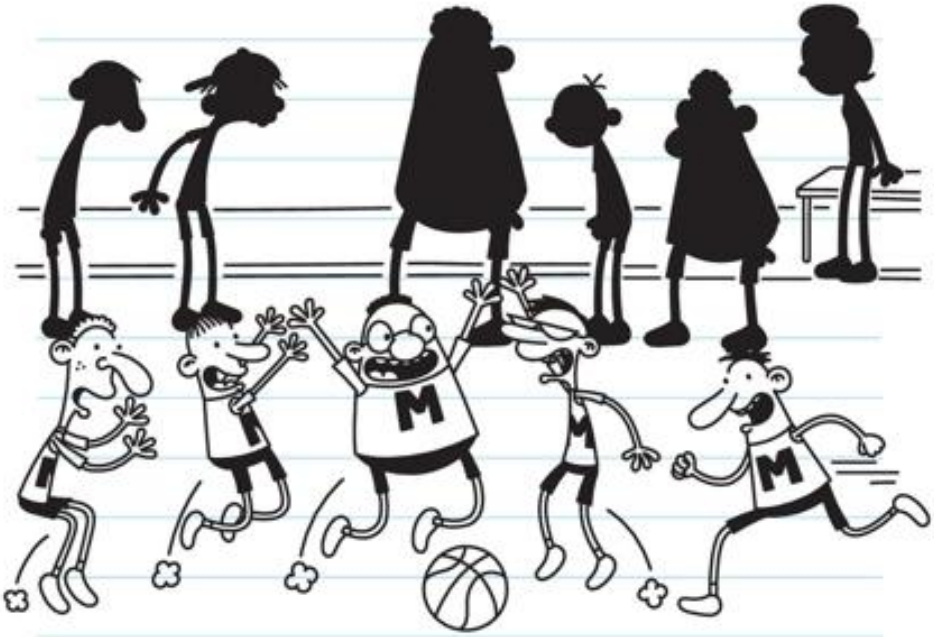
skills with their BRAINS.

Their team was busy on defence, so we scored a

bunch, too. But we couldn't do anything to stop

their OFFENCE, and at the final buzzer the

score was 37—30, Mathlete All-Stars.



Me and my teammates were pretty bummed out

because we knew this was our big chance to finally

get a win, and we blew it. Plus, we felt a little

dumb for packing overnight bags.

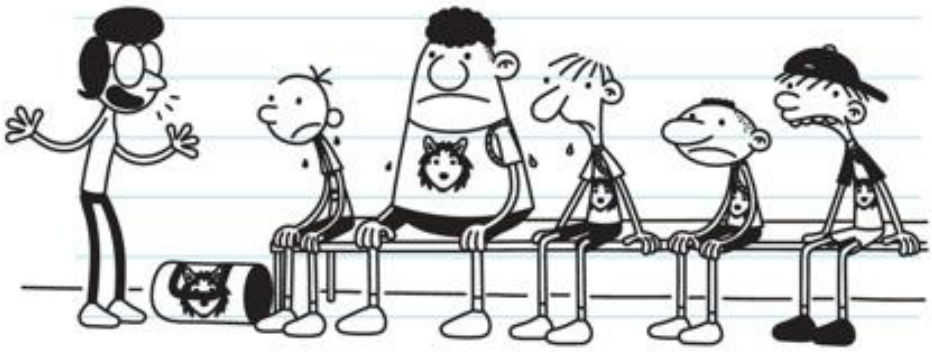
But then Mom told us something that was pretty

shocking. She said that in the Second Chance

Tournament you played until you WON.

That meant the Mathletes were going home, and

we were STAYING.



Well, that changed EVERYTHING. It meant

we were actually STUCK in this place until we

got a victory. And now it made sense why they

decided to hold this tournament in a PRISON.

Mom checked the results for the first-round games

to see who we were facing next. The name of the

team was the Brawlers, which sounded a little more

intimidating than the Mathletes.

But then Mom got the scoop. The Brawlers was a

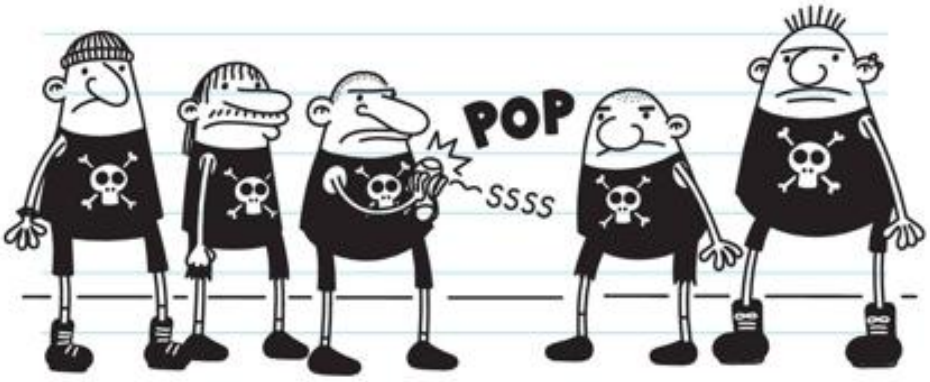
team made up of all the kids in the state who got

thrown out of games for FIGHTING, so I guess

the "second chance" thing wasn't just about WINS.

When we got our first look at these guys, we

knew we were in trouble.



I was glad Mom didn't put me in the starting

line-up, because the game was a fight from start

to finish. Right after the tip-off, one of the

Brawlers clotheslined Kevin. So Ruby Bird jumped on

that kid's BACK, and then EVERYONE joined in.

I don't think the refs wanted to get in the middle

of a fight, so they just let it go. And I'm pretty

sure they didn't blow their whistles ONCE.

Since there wasn't a lot of actual basketball being

played, it was a low-scoring contest. But the

Brawlers edged us out in the end, and the final

score was 6—5.

Our team was pretty pooped from playing two

games in a row, but we weren't done yet. We had

to face a team called the Stage Whisperers in the

third round, and they looked tired, too.

I couldn't figure out what the deal with these

guys was until we started playing. They must've

been a part of the theatre group at their school,

because they were all great ACTORS.

Every time one of our players would get anywhere

NEAR one of those guys, they'd flop and act

like they were injured. And, even though we never

touched them, we picked up fifteen personal fouls

in the first quarter.

Their team scored almost all their points from the

free-throw line, and we ended up losing that one

33–17. And if we'd had to play another game after

that, I don't think we could've actually done it.

Luckily the next round wasn't until the morning, so

we went to a hotel a few miles away, where I was

looking forward to getting a good night's sleep.

But I guess Mom didn't think we'd still be playing

this late in the tournament, so she hadn't booked

our rooms ahead of time. And by then there were

only two left in the hotel.

So Mom booked one room for her and Ruby, and

one for the REST of us. I don't know what it

was like to share a room with Ruby, but I can

tell you it sure wasn't fun sharing a room with the

guys on my team.

From the way my teammates were acting, I doubt

any of those guys had ever been in a hotel room

before. And I actually thought about calling

security on them a bunch of times.

But I DIDN'T and that was a big mistake.

Because one of them started an ice-cube fight and

hit a sprinkler in the ceiling.

It turns out that when the sprinklers go off it

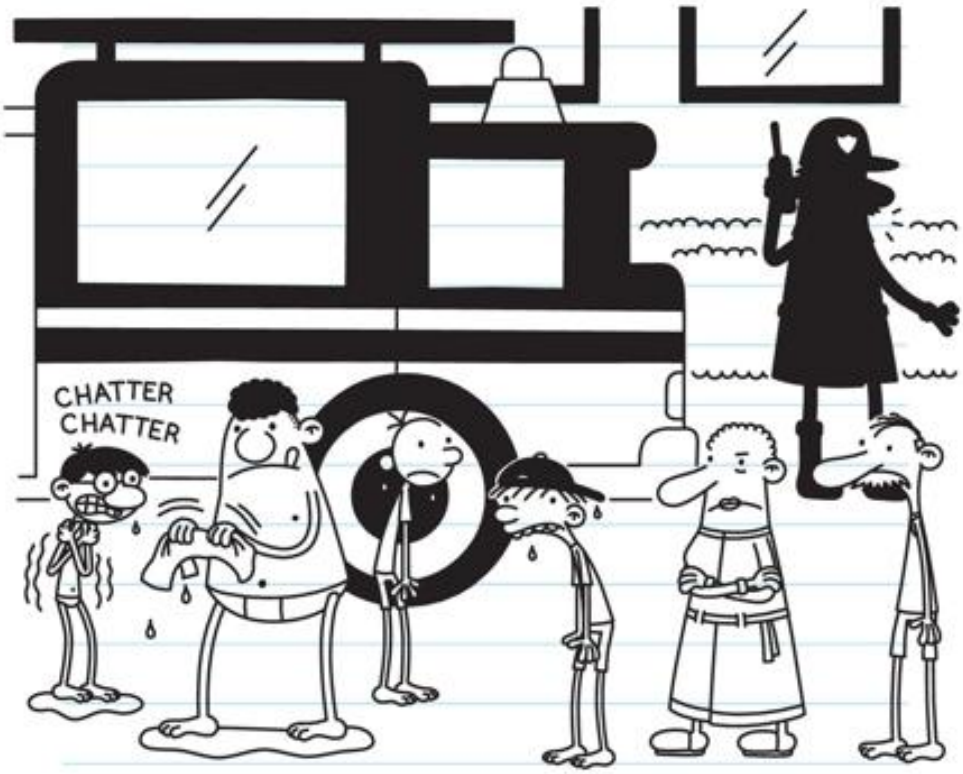
triggers the fire alarm.

So we spent the next two hours outside in the

freezing cold, along with everyone ELSE who was

staying at the hotel, while the fire department

reset the alarms.



In the morning, Mom was pretty annoyed with

us, but she seemed focused on the day ahead.

During breakfast, Mom said we were heading into

the Final Four, and that we all needed to play as

a team to pull out a win today.

Then she told everyone about how it felt to

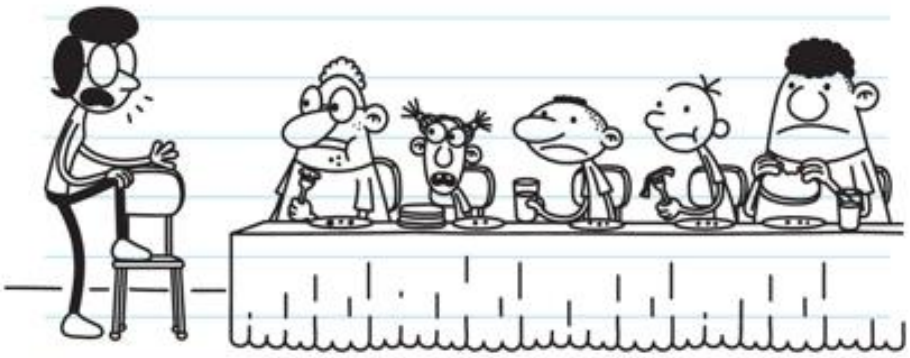
lose her very last game, and that she sometimes

wonders if she could've done anything DIFFERENT

to change the outcome. Mom said she didn't want

US to have any regrets, so we needed to leave

everything on the floor today.



It was a good speech and all, but the difference

between Mom's team and our team was that her

team was trying to prove they were the BEST, and

we were just trying not to be the WORST. So the

truth is, we didn't really need the extra motivation.

Yesterday morning, when we showed up at the

tournament, nobody knew who we were. But

after setting off the fire alarm last night

EVERYONE did.

And the team we played in the next round was

out for REVENGE. They were the only all-girl

team in the whole tournament, and I guess they

didn't appreciate having their sleep interrupted.

So, when we faced off against the Banshees, they

were ready to PLAY

In the third quarter, Mom had to take Ruby

out of the game to give her a rest. But I really

wished she hadn't put ME in to take her place,

because it was like throwing raw meat to a bunch

of WOLVES.

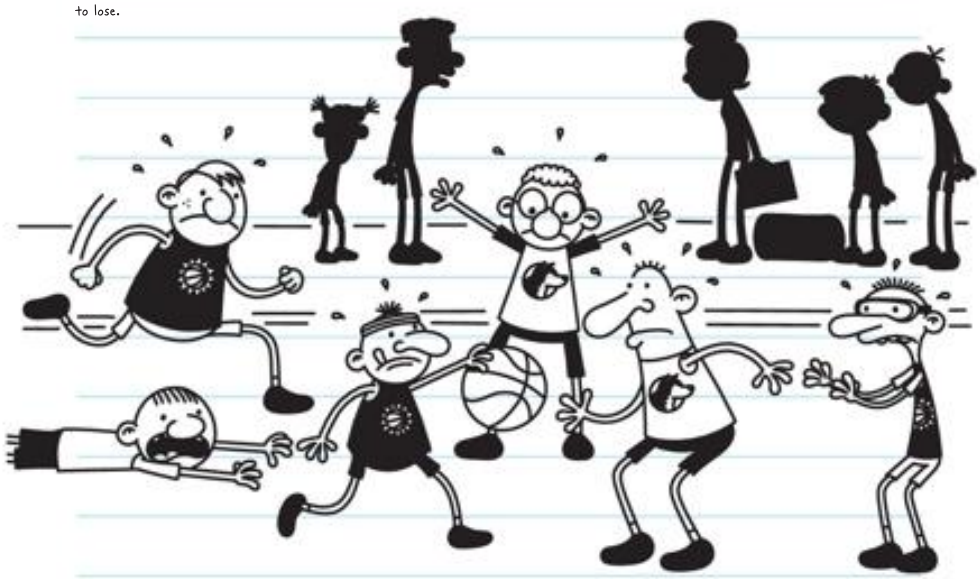
I don't even remember what the final score was.

All I know is that we lost, and they got to go

home.

I have no idea how the Banshees lasted so long in the tournament without a win, because those girls were TOUGH. But, when I saw the two teams who were still fighting for the chance to go home, I could see why those guys were still here.

The two teams left were the original Huskies and the Funky Dunkers. And they both looked equally terrible to ME, so it was anyone's game to lose.



But the Funky Dunkers only had five players with no subs. So, even though they put up a good fight, they ran out of steam at the end. And that meant they had to face us in the FINALS.

I should've figured this out a lot sooner, but

EVERYONE in this tournament couldn't go home

a winner. And whoever lost the last game would

know for sure that they were the worst team in

the state.

So we all wanted to win the last game, but

nobody wanted it more than MOM. And before

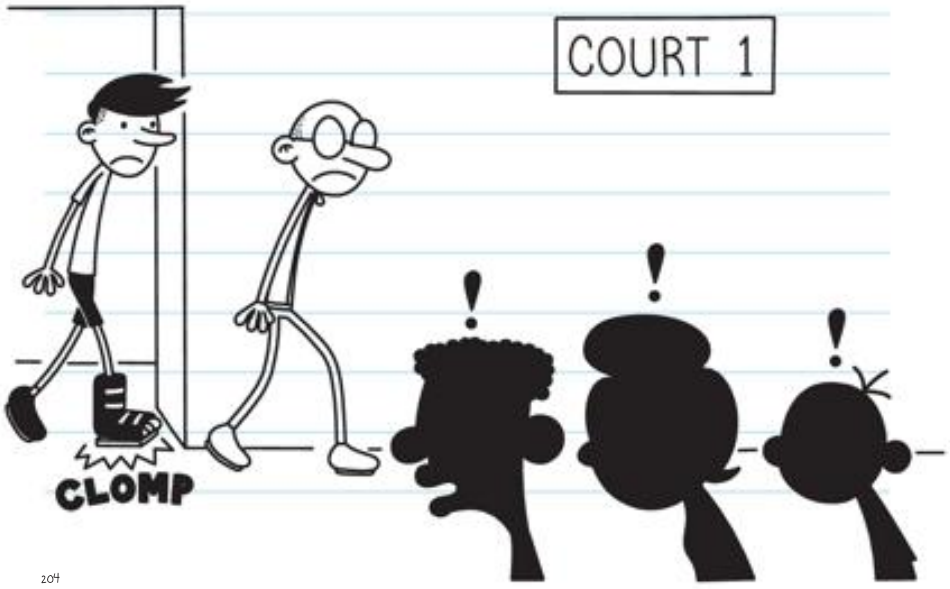
we started she went over the game plan and made

some last-minute changes to the line-up.

By that point, almost everybody had left the

building, and the place was practically EMPTY.

But then two people walked in through the doors.



Preet was wearing some sort of boot, so I guess

that meant he didn't need crutches any more.

Mom asked Mr Patel what they were doing here,

and he said they heard we were playing today, so

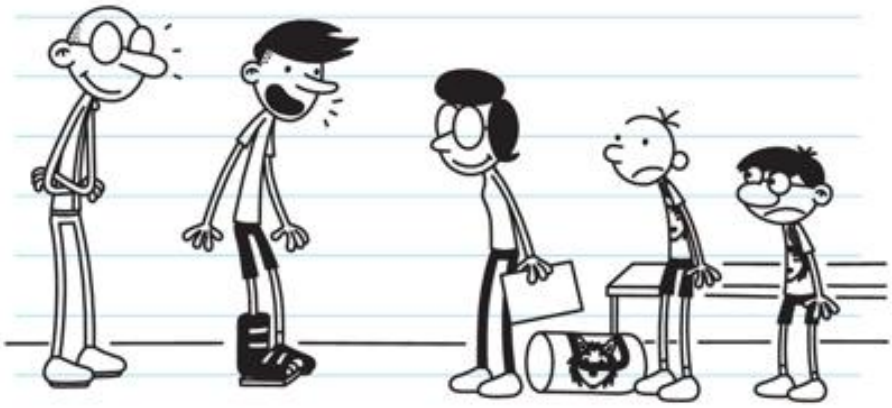
they came to support us.

But Mom said we didn't need cheerleaders – we

needed PLAYERS. Then she asked Preet if he'd

be willing to play in his boot. And I guess Preet

must've missed competing, because he said YES.



Luckily, Mom had a spare jersey in her bag, and

she gave it to Preet to suit up. Then she put him

in the starting line-up and told us she was making

one more change to the game plan.

Mom threw out all our plays and replaced them

with just one, which was called "Get the Ball to

Preet". And everyone was happy because we finally

had a play we could UNDERSTAND.

The ref blew the whistle to start the game, and

we won the opening tip-off. Yusef passed the ball

to Preet, who was better on ONE leg than the

rest of us on TWO.

The only problem was that he couldn't RUN. And

every time he scored the Funky Dunkers got an

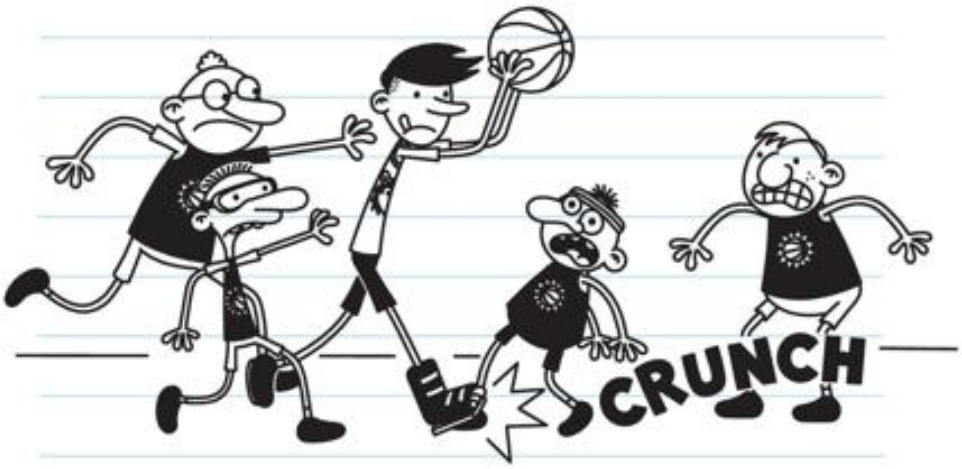
easy basket at the other end of the floor.

Just before half-time, something really AWFUL

happened. A bunch of kids on the other team

were trying to stop Preet from shooting, and he

stepped on their point guard's foot with his boot.

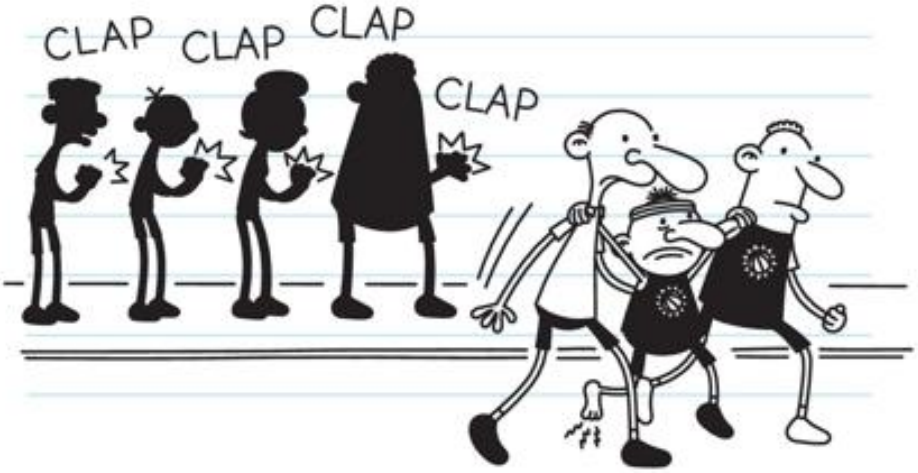


The kid had to be helped off the floor by his

coach and another player, and we all clapped,

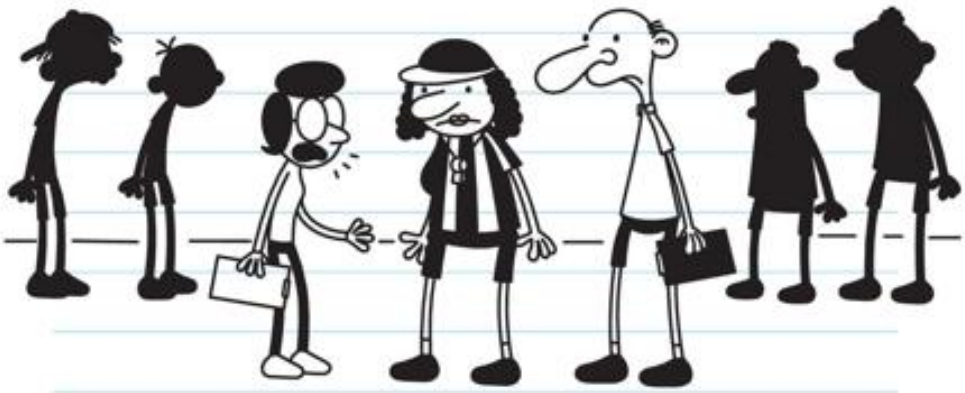
because for some reason that's what you're supposed

to do in that situation.



But now the Funky Dunkers were down to four players. The head ref said that since the Funky Dunkers didn't have a full team they were gonna have to FORFEIT. And I think their coach was totally fine with that.

But Mom WASN'T. She said, if we were gonna win, she wanted us to do it fair and square. So she said she'd send one of OUR players to the other team so we could finish the game.



I guess the other coach figured he had nothing to lose, so he agreed. Then he said he'd take PREET. But the head ref said MOM should be the one to decide which player to send to the other team. And, after thinking it over for a minute, she picked ME.

To be honest, I was kind of shocked, because

I never expected to get traded by my own

MOTHER. But, as I walked towards the other

team's bench, she whispered something in my ear.

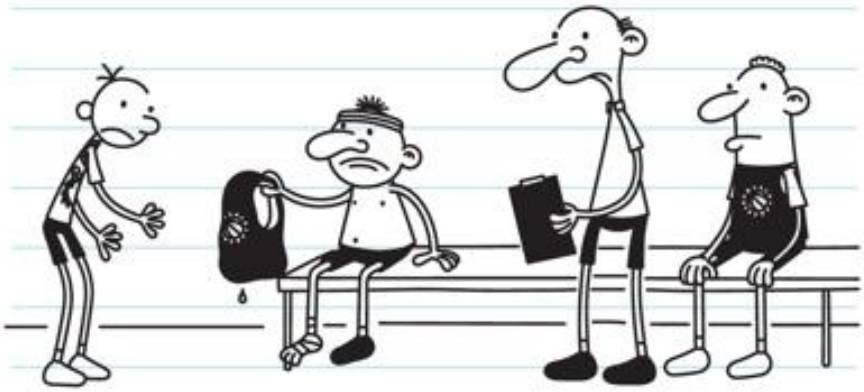
Well, now I was TOTALLY confused. I wanted

our team to win this game just as much as Mom

did, but I didn't think she'd want me to CHEAT

I was willing to do whatever it took, though,

including putting on someone else's UNIFORM.



When the second half started, I got out on the

floor and acted like I was trying my hardest.

But I guess my new teammates didn't trust me,

anyway, because they wouldn't pass the ball to me.

After a few minutes, I just stood in the corner

to stay out of everyone's way. And that was

actually a great spot to watch the game, which

was starting to get really GOOD.

Every time Preet would hit some crazy shot,

somebody on the Funky Dunkers would score at the

other end. It went back and forth like that for

the whole second half, and I was so caught up

watching the game I forgot I was actually IN it.

So, when Preet missed a three-pointer and the ball

bounced off the rim, I was shocked when it came

to ME.

I didn't know if I should pass or dribble or

WHAT. But I couldn't really do anything anyway,

because all of a sudden my former teammates were

all OVER me.

The clock was ticking down, and the Funky

Dunkers were behind by two. So I looked over at

the bench to see what Mom wanted me to do, but

she didn't exactly look like she was rooting for me.

That's when I realized why Mom sent me to the

other side in the first place. It wasn't because I

was some sort of "secret weapon". It was because

I STANK, and she knew I'd blow it for the

Funky Dunkers.

But by then I honestly didn't CARE. I just

wanted to get rid of the ball to give myself a

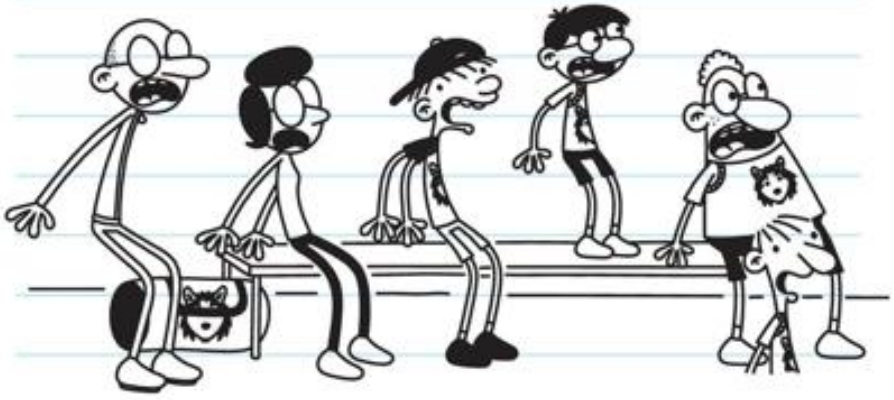
little space.

So I chucked it with all my might.

When I launched it, everybody just FROZE, and

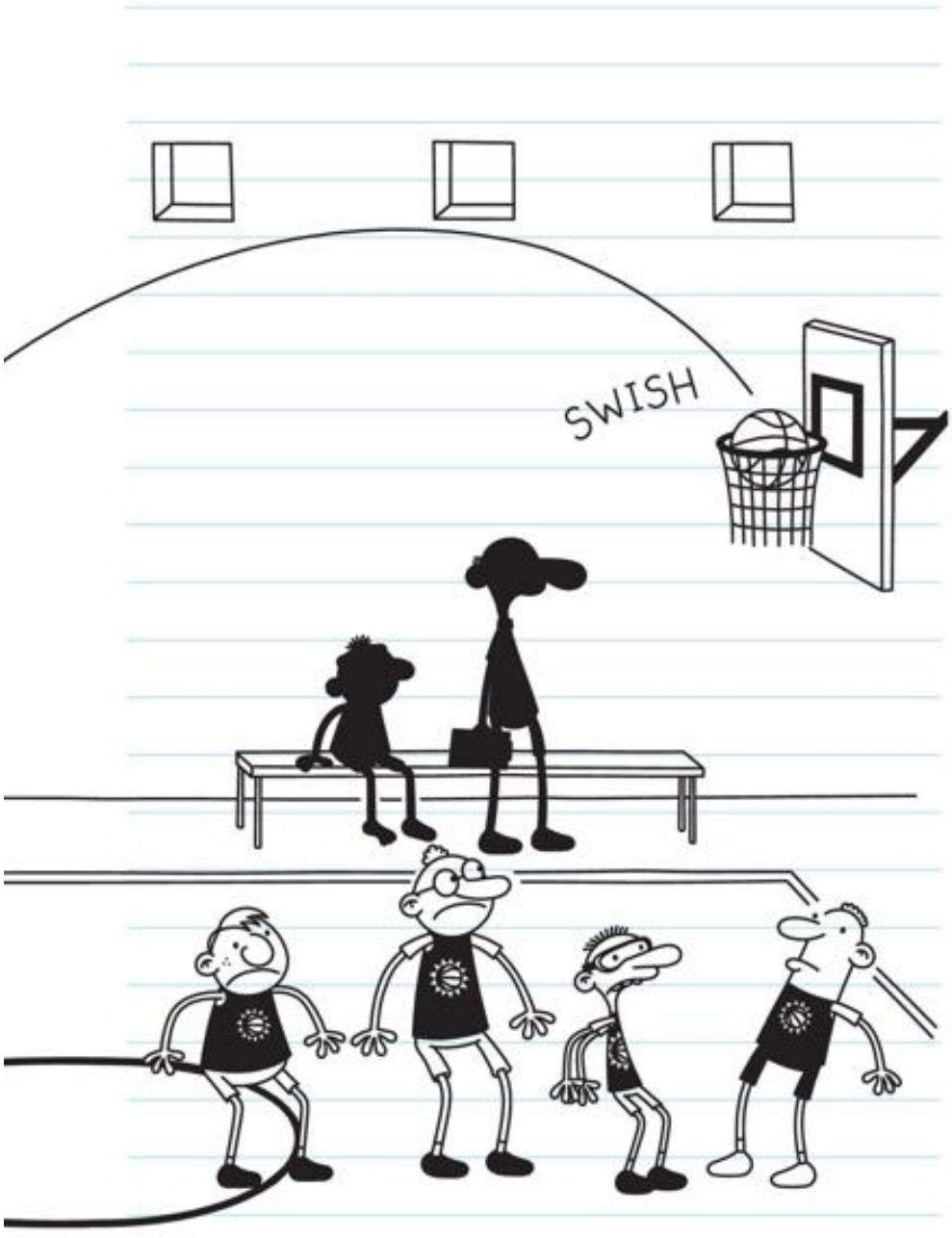
it felt like time stood still. And all anybody could

do was watch as the ball flew through the air.



And when the ball went through the net at the

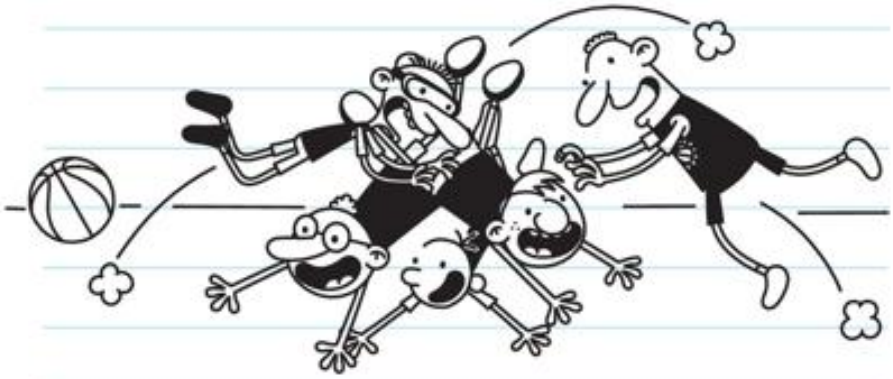
other side of the court you could hear a pin drop.


SWISH

My shot was good for three points, which put the

Funky Dunkers ahead by one. And when the final

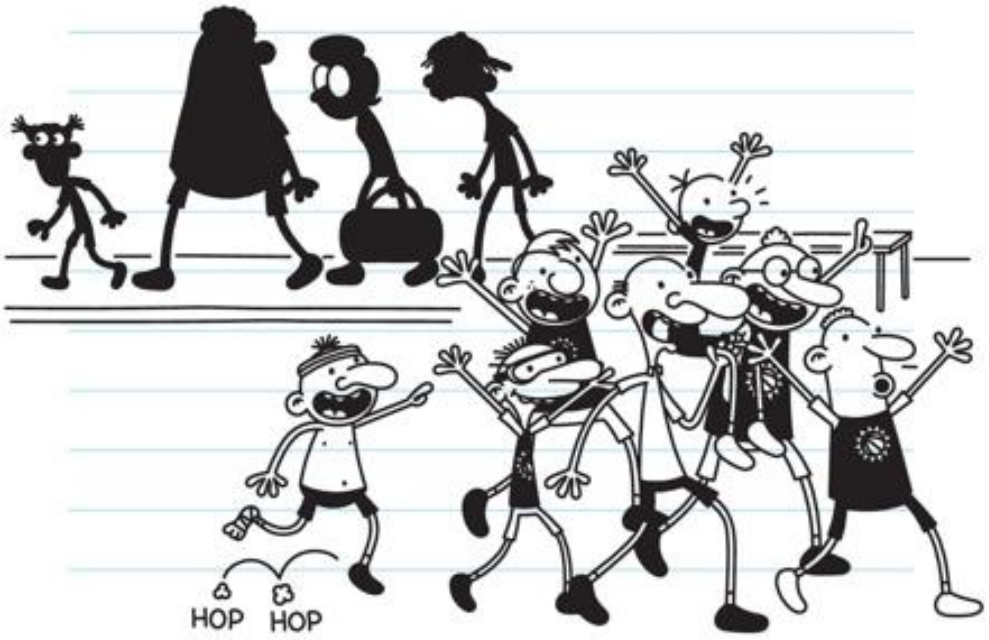
buzzer went off my new teammates SWARMED me.



I finally got to see how it felt to be the HERO

for once, and for the first time I could see why

everybody's always making a big deal about sports.



In fact, I was thinking that this would make a

good MOVIE. So I started working on getting

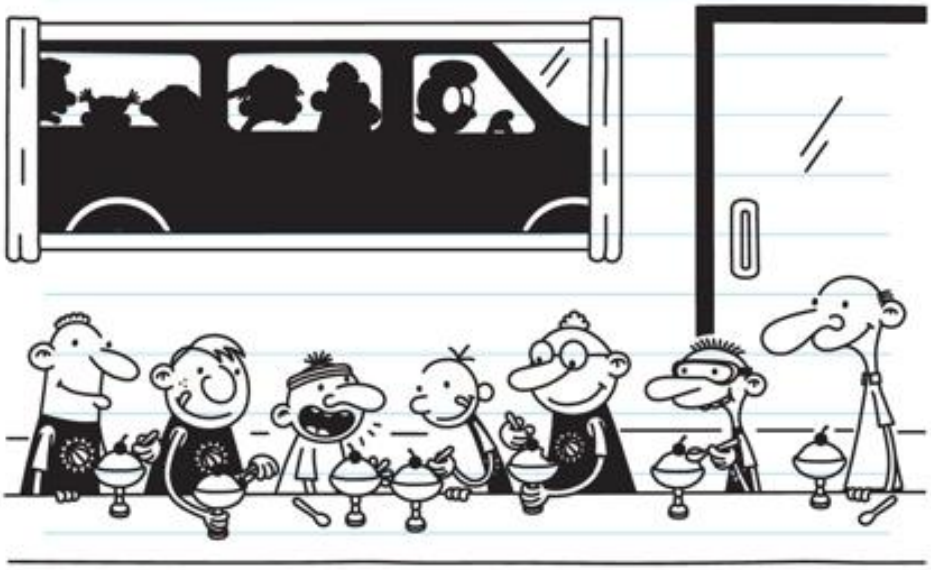
signatures from my new teammates.

I gotta say, Mom was right about sport bringing

people together. After the game, me and the guys

went out for ice cream. And we were having so

much fun that we decided to have SECONDS.



We were even talking about getting the team

together and doing this all over again NEXT year.

And, even though that could be fun, I think

sometimes you should just quit while you're ahead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my wife, Julie, for being so supportive and encouraging, and thanks to my whole family for being in my corner all these years.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Kinney is a No. 1 *New York Times* best selling author and a six-time Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award winner for Favourite Book. Jeff has been named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People in the World. He spent his childhood in the Washington, D.C., area and moved to New England, where he and his wife own a bookstore named An Unlikely Story.